THE GIRL FROM U.N.C.L.E.

MAGAZINE

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NOW

ALL THE *U.N.C.L.E.s*

APRIL DANCER
MARK SLATE
ALEXANDER WAVERLY
NAPOLEON SOLO
ILLYA KURYAKIN

in —

THE SINISTER SATELLITE AFFAIR

A NEW Complete Novel by
ROBERT HART DAVIS

The Sinister Satellite Affair

Number VII of *The Girl From UNCLE*

Robert Hart Davis

Tags:Grizli777

THE SINISTER SATELLITE AFFAIR

By Robert Hart Davis

High over the earth, triggered to explode, the most terrible weapon known to man waited THRUSH's orders to strike; as April Dancer alone held the leash to a vast nuclear time bomb–in full orbit!

ONE

DANGER FROM SPACE

A leathery face man with iron gray hair leaned back in his chair and thoughtfully contemplated the United Nations building visible through his one-way window. He could see out, but from the outside the wall looked solid.

"I wonder," he said softly in a voice that held the slightest trace of a British accent, "if they are making a gross mistake over there."

Behind him a light flashed on the curving desk covered with buttons and switches. He turned his chair around with his back to the splendid view of the UN. He pressed a button and said into a concealed speaker: "Alexander Waverly here."

"Mr. Waverly, this is Section III Intelligence. We have the report you asked for."

"Excellent," Waverly said. "Let me have it."

"Gustave Van Cleve underwent plastic surgery in a Zurich, Switzerland, hospital six months ago," the intelligence clerk said. "The facial scar was removed. He has not been heard of since then."

"Thank you," Waverly said. When the connection was broken, he leaned over and picked up an unlighted pipe from the desk. He caressed the bowl thoughtfully as his agile mind turned over the disturbing pieces of the puzzle that worried him.

A light flashed again on the console.

"Yes. Alexander Waverly here."

"Mr. Waverly. Section I. We have received the official reply from the secretary general of the UN to your super-secret message. Shall I read it?"

"Under no circumstances," Waverly said in clipped tones. "What is the gist?"

"The secretary general says there is absolutely no evidence to support your suspicions about the Red Chinese Satellite I," the voice from Section I replied.

"I see," Waverly said.

"The message goes on to say in effect that the UN is very much

against any investigation we might make of Satellite I. They feel that the entrance of Red China into the peaceful space race is an excellent sign of thawing international relations. They do not wish to arouse any Chinese suspicions that might disrupt these relations."

"Thank you," Waverly said.

He contemplated the pipe, talking to it as if the briar was human.

"I am afraid we are in for trouble," he said softly. "I am positive there is as great a menace as the world has ever known in that satellite. I–"

"Mr. Waverly," a voice from the concealed speaker in the communications desk console said. "It is time for the world-wide reports."

"So soon?" Waverly said. His seamed face showed a flicker of surprise.

A glance at the recessed clock showed him that it was time to receive his daily reports from U.N.C.L.E. operatives scattered around the world. In his absorption in this new danger time had skipped by more rapidly than he realized.

"Very well," he said, "patch me into the network."

He leaned back, rubbing the bowl of the briar pipe while he waited for the communications net to be completed. Lights came on as each operative was contacted.

Mentally Waverly checked them off. April Dancer in Paris. Mark Slate in London. Napoleon Solo in Hong Kong. Illya Kuryakin in Zurich, Switzerland. Swiftly the super secret communications channels of the organization known as U.N.C.L.E.–from the initials of the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement–reached around the world to link the voices of the various operatives together.

It was only a matter of a few seconds, but that was too long for the man who headed the world's greatest agency against international crime.

It was a mysterious organization U.N.C.L.E. Its purpose was open enough: to provide a crime-fighting system that would not be hampered by international boundaries, which could operate anywhere at any time.

But how it was founded, financed and operated is the secret of a handful of highly placed men of several major countries. Under its charter U.N.C.L.E. does not, in fact cannot concern itself with national crime problems. This is the responsibility of an individual nation.

From its well-guarded headquarters in a disguised brownstone front building in New York's lower fifties, U.N.C.L.E. directs its world-wide organization solely against international crime and intrigue that threatens world safety.

"The circuit is complete," the voice from the speaker said.

“Thank you,” the U.N.C.L.E. operations chief replied. Then into the speaker he said, “Report, please.”

The secret radio beams flashed around the world. A girl’s vibrant voice spoke first: “April Dancer in Paris, Mr. Waverly.”

“Mark Slate in London, sir,” a man’s voice came next. It was a casual tone with a decidedly British accent.

“Illya Kuryakin, Zurich, Switzerland, Mr. Waverly.” This voice was flat and almost without expression, but carried an undertone of hardness.

“Napoleon Solo in Hong Kong, sir.” This was a deeper voice than the others. It was somewhat soft spoken, but carried a ring of authority.

“Before you make your own reports, let me bring you up to date on developments here,” Waverly said, choosing his words with great care. “The officials with whom I talked at the UN refuse, on the basis of the proof we have at the moment, to consider Red Satellite I as anything but the peaceful space experiment the Chinese Communists claim it to be.”

“Then we will proceed alone?” Napoleon Solo asked.

“That may be difficult,” Alexander Waverly said slowly. “I have discussed my suspicions with representatives of the foreign offices of both the United States and Great Britain. Both are reluctant to take any action that would antagonize Red China at this moment when it appears that diplomatic feelers are thawing the freeze between East and West.”

“Can’t they be shown that this thaw is to throw them off guard?” April Dancer asked.

“They did not consider what little proof I had as conclusive,” Waverly said. “Even more important, they did not consider a single satellite in space, even if it were an orbiting H-bomb, to be a world threat.”

“It would seem that a single bomb in space, no matter how large, could only menace a single point on the planet,” Kuryakin put in. “They certainly can’t conquer the world with one bomb.”

“That is exactly the argument I got,” Waverly said. “And unfortunately, it is an argument I cannot refute. All I know is that men from THRUSH assisted the Chinese in placing this Red Satellite I in orbit. That I have proved to my satisfaction. Certainly THRUSH would not be involved in this unless there were enormous stakes involved.”

There was silence from his four operatives as they considered their chief’s words.

THRUSH! It was a word they heard with mixed emotions. It was an enemy they had fought in deathly struggles to save the world from frightful dangers. THRUSH! They didn’t even know what the word

was supposed to mean, but they did know that it was an evil organization of extremely brilliant scientists, spies, adventurers, and murderers. It had one objective: to bring the world under its total domination.

"Actually I have very little upon which to base my suspicions," Waverly went on. "I do know that a suspected THRUSH spy named Van Cleve disappeared after being seen with Wing Lee How, director of the Red Satellite I program. Also that four other THRUSH rocket scientists, those I had you investigating, were studying Chinese."

"My man, Percival Chamberlain, has left London," Mark Slate reported. "His relatives report he is in the South Seas doing volcanic research. I can find no record of any boat sailing to that area."

Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin also reported negative results concerning the men they were trying to trace.

"I may have something!" April Dancer's voice held such suppressed excitement that Alexander Waverly sat up out of his slouch. The briar pipe slipped unnoticed from his hand.

Despite an appearance more in keeping with parading chic fashions across the stage of a famous designer, April Dancer's feminine beauty hid a mind as sharp as any of the male members of the U.N.C.L.E. team. More important, she had never lost her almost little girlish enthusiasm for her work. Where the mention of their deadly enemy, THRUSH, brought grim expressions to the faces of the men, it made April's dark eyes dance like her name.

"Yes?" Alexander Waverly said eagerly into his microphone.

In London, Hong Kong, and Zurich the other three U.N.C.L.E. agents waited with equal expectancy. They understood the gravity of the situation and the problems they faced if they ran into political interference in this affair. At the moment all their investigations were running into a blank wall.

In dealing with THRUSH it was imperative that they move in quickly. A delay could be fatal.

"Yes, yes! What is it, Miss Dancer?" Waverly said somewhat testily as April hesitated.

In her small apartment overlooking the Seine in Paris, April Dancer stretched out her long slender legs and stared through the window at the lights of the Eiffel Tower etched against the night sky.

"I didn't know the investigation I was making of Francoise LeBrun was tied in with Satellite I," she said. "But in trying to uncover his tracks, I did come across something that seems a little curious now."

"Please, Miss Dancer!" Waverly's anxiety put a sharper edge on his voice than he usually employed with his agents. "Could we possibly save the gossip until this affair is closed? What is the connection!"

"Sorry, sir," April said. "I checked with every person who had come in contact with LeBrun for the last two months. One of these was Franklyn Pierce!"

"Franklyn Pierce? But we checked out Pierce when he defected," Solo put in from Hong Kong. "The U.S. Space Agency said that he had no information that would reveal any U.S. secrets. He–"

"But you don't understand!"

April broke in impatiently. "Pierce was the one who–"

The sudden break in her voice electrified the four men. They waited in a growing agony of expectation. They knew the circuit was not broken, for they could hear the faint humming which came from the automatic coder which garbled their voices into a super-secret code and then unscrambled them on receipt.

After a suspenseful ten seconds, Alexander Waverly said, "Miss Dancer? Come in, please! Can you receive me, Miss Dancer?"

Suddenly a shout blasted out from the speaker. Alexander Waverly gripped the edge of his desk. It was a man's voice.

"Miss Dancer!" he cried.

All he received in answer was the roar of a gun. The sound was unmistakable. It was the distinctive crash of an U.N.C.L.E. Special.

"Miss Dancer!" the U.N.C.L.E. operations chief repeated.

His reply was the blast of an explosion–and then the circuit to Paris went dead!

TWO
NIGHT ATTACK

In Paris April Dancer, the Girl from U.N.C.L.E. had been lolling back in a chair in her apartment while she talked to Waverly in New York. She had darkened the room so she could enjoy the lovely view across the night skyline of the "city of light."

While Waverly had the intricate U.N.C.L.E. communications console in front of him, April spoke into what looked like a silver fountain pen. A six-inch antenna was pulled from its interior which converted it into the famous U.N.C.L.E. pen-communicator–an ultra-miniaturized transceiver that could transmit and receive world-wide over the secret U.N.C.L.E. channel.

When Waverly's explanation suddenly triggered a startling idea in her mind, several apparently minor and unrelated bits of information fell into place like a jigsaw puzzle.

She sat up straight, her eyes dancing, her face flushed with excitement. She blurted out her remarks about Franklyn Pierce. She heard Napoleon Solo voice his objections from Hong Kong. Then, before she could tell them her suspicions, her sharp eyes caught a

movement outside her window.

She leaped to her feet, dropping the pen-communicator on the army of the chair as her right hand darted for the bag lying on the table beside the chair. She jerked out the miniature version of the U.N.C.L.E. Special.

"Quick!" A man's voice yelled from the tiny iron-railed balcony outside her window. "She sees me! Let her have it!"

His frightened cry echoed off the walls and came in garbled on the still open pen communicator circuit. The tense men in New York, Zurich, London and Hong Kong could not distinguish the words.

April saw a man's dark form dangling from a rope that evidently was thrown down from the balcony above. At the same time she saw a man already on the rail, climbing over.

She fired. He yelled and pitched forward on his face. At the moment she shot, the man dangling from the rope hurled something at her.

In the gloom it looked about the size of a wrapped book.

"A bomb!" April gasped.

Her finger tightened on the trigger of the U.N.C.L.E. Special. She fired at the hurtling package only a split second after it left the thrower's hand. Hours of hard practice on the U.N.C.L.E. firing range saved her life now.

The bullet struck the bomb package. It knocked the explosive package back, but not far enough. It struck the edge of the iron rail and exploded with a tremendous crash.

The shock wave hit April as she threw herself to the carpet. The balcony cracked and fell. The walls sagged. April frantically caught the leg of the chair. She pulled it around in front of her as the entire facings of the French windows leading to the balcony were ripped from the wall and thrown back at her.

Plaster and smoke filled the air. She could scarcely see or breathe. For a moment the entire room quivered. Then the brick wall gave way around the explosion area. It collapsed into the street with a roar.

Without the side support the floor sagged badly, dropping to almost a forty-five degree tilt. The chair April gripped to protect her from falling plaster and timber started to slide down the incline.

April Dancer let it go and tried to save herself. There was nothing she could grab. She clawed at the carpet, but couldn't get a grip. She kept sliding. The gaping hole in the side of the building now opened on a three-and-a-half story drop. I was a killing fall at best, but now it was sheer murder.

Piles of smoking masonry, brick and the jagged spears of shattered timber reared up directly in her line of fall.

Frantically April tried to stop her slide. The floor tilted worse. She

had to drop her gun, but she still couldn't stop her death slide.

She jammed her shoe heels into the carpet and dug as deeply as possible with her fingers. It slowed her fall, but did not stop it. The overstuffed chair went over the brink. She heard the chilling sound as it shattered on the smoking piles of brick below.

She was on her stomach, sliding down. Her feet, thighs and then her hips went over the edge. She couldn't stop herself.

As her body slid over the edge of the sagging floor, her grasping fingers caught the edge of the wood. She hung there. The floor quivered for an awful moment so that she thought it would completely collapse.

April Dancer looked down. Some of the wood from the explosion was burning. She could clearly see the piles of brick and jagged beams pointing up at her.

She gave up the idea of dropping. It was sheer suicide. In the distance she could hear shouts of people running toward her. She thought she could hang on until help came.

But a second later there was a sharp crack from across the street. April thought at first that it was the sagging floor giving away for wood splintered to the right of her head.

Then she realized that it was the crack of a gun. The distinctive sound marked it as a THRUSH gun, a special weapon patterned after but inferior to the U.N.C.L.E. Special.

The gun cracked again. The slug smashed closer to April's head. The jar loosed another sagging beam. The floor tilted even more.

In the split second she had to think April realized she could not hang on any longer. Digging her fingers into the quivering edge of the floor until her muscles almost cramped, she swung her legs back to get her body swinging.

The THRUSH murderer fired again. His aim was better now, despite the darkness. The slug ripped through the air close enough to put a hole just above the hem of her mini-skirt. If she hadn't been swinging it would have torn into her body.

Above her the tortured timbers were giving away. She could hear the cracking up of the remaining beams.

The floor sagged more. She knew there was only seconds before it fell. Across the street the determined THRUSH liquidator fired again.

At that instance April felt the floor give way. As it dropped she swung her body inwards, putting all her strength into a circus-like swing, and let go.

She swung into the gaping opening, exposing the floor directly under the one that was falling. She hit with her feet on the rug, but at an acute angle that caused her to fall backward. She sat down hard and rolled over.

There was a heavy library-type table near her. She scrambled madly to get under it as the falling ceiling-the floor she had just quitted came plunging down.

The legs of the table cracked. Before it could collapse on her, April grabbed a broken board and propped it under the table.

Outside car lights flashed in the dark street. A police car siren wailed. In the distance she could hear the whine of a fire siren as well.

The ceiling had stopped falling. April stiffly pulled herself erect and walked gingerly over to the edge, where she could see below through the large hole made by the bomb exploding on the floor above.

She could see a *gendarme* getting out of the police car.

"Where were you when I needed you?" April said somewhat grumpily.

Below the French policeman saw her. Profusely and with a large amount of explanatory arm-swinging he announced that he would personally save her.

There was a perfectly good stairway still standing at the side of the apartment house, but the young gendarme was insistent that April was unable to walk and that he should personally carry her down the steps.

Fortunately for international relations a car from the *Surete* pulled up. A tall Frenchman slightly past middle age got out.

April Dancer waved down to him.

"Inspector Gabin!" the girl from U.N.C.L.E. called.

The inspector looked up. He had a perpetually sad expression on his face, but his eyes belied the lugubrious cast of his mouth. They twinkled like Maurice Chevalier's.

The spotlight from the first police car had been turned on the front of the ruined building. It clearly outlined April and the discomfited young patrolman.

April climbed over the wreckage and met Gabin at the top of the stairs. He looked at her reproachfully.

"And you told me that you were working on a matter of small importance," he said.

"I honestly thought it was simply a missing persons investigation," April replied. "But it seems to be something more than that."

"So it would appear," Gabin said. "And I suppose you just happen not to have observed your potential murderer and therefore regret you cannot assist me–as usual."

"On the contrary, Inspector," April said with a flashing smile. "There were two of them. And they should both be under the debris waiting for you to tell me who they are."

He gave her a straight look that seemed to April Dancer to

penetrate right into her head. Gabin, as she well knew, was a man-hunter of more than average ability.

"You don't know who they are?" he asked.

"No," she said, "and I certainly hope you can tell me."

"What is behind this?" he asked.

"I wish I could tell you," April said. "But I don't know myself."

He grunted and led her back dawn the steps. A rescue squad was already taking the two dead men from the wreckage. One had a gaping hole in his chest where April's bullet bit him. The second was crushed by falling masonry when the Girl from U.N.C.L.E.'s bullet deflected the bomb back at him.

Gabin walked over and silently surveyed the corpses.

"I will rush their prints to headquarters for identification," one of the homicide team said to the inspector.

"It isn't necessary," Gabin said, an odd note in his voice.

He straightened up and looked hard at April.

"Young lady," he said. "Come over here. I must talk with you alone. This is serious. Deadly serious. My information is that U.N.C.L.E. does not meddle in politics."

"But we don't," April protested. Gabin turned and gave the dead men a final stare.

"It would seem otherwise," he said in a flat voice. "Your Mr. Waverly may have some difficult explaining to do. It could even cost your organization the right to operate in France in the future. What has happened is that serious, Miss Dancer!"

THREE

NO CHANCE FOR FAILURE

In New York, Zurich, London and Hong Kong, four anxious men from U.N.C.L.E. sat hunched over the various receiving sets, hungry for word from April Dancer. Nothing came. Her pen-communicator had been lost in the bombing.

When it became apparent that no further communication was coming from the girl in Paris, Waverly said to Mark Slate in London: "Charter a plane at once. Get to Paris and do what you can to help Miss Dancer in whatever trouble she is in."

"Leaving instantly!" Slate's clipped British voice said.

His circuit went dead immediately.

"Mr. Kuryakin, there is nothing more you can do in Zurich. Can you join Mr. Slate in Paris?"

"I'll be there in two hours," Illya's flat tones said quickly.

"And Mr. Solo–"

"Yes, sir?"

"This matter is so serious that I think it best that you come back here and join me at headquarters. I think–One moment, please," Waverly added. "I have an emergency call. Please stand by."

The U.N.C.L.E. operations chief leaned over and cut in a new circuit. He left the beam open to Hong Kong so his chief enforcement agent could listen in.

"Alex–"

Waverly's face twisted in surprise. He hastily cut off the beam to Hong Kong.

"Yes, Jim," he said into his speaker.

"I have just received an emergency call from UN headquarters. They were disturbed enough to put a complaint to each of the governing board of U.N.C.L.E. You, as one of us, should get your copy any minute. What is going on?"

Waverly sat stunned for a moment. This was the first official complaint ever lodged against him. And for it to be addressed to each of the men who formed the board of directors of the famous crime-fighting organization bespoke a matter of extreme seriousness.

"I haven't received my copy," Waverly said. "It may be here. I gave orders not to be disturbed because of an urgent program I am working on."

"Well, the report I got was that U.N.C.L.E. is interfering with

delicate international negotiations aimed at easing tension between Communist China and the West. Specifically, you are trying to find something sinister in Red Satellite I."

"I sent them a warning this morning that apparently THRUSH scientists are mixed up in the launch," Waverly said. "I have done nothing more."

"This is more than that," the U.N.C.L.E. governor said. "I don't know the details, but apparently it has to do with the killing of an important Chinese embassy official in Paris."

"I know nothing about that," Alexander Waverly said.

"The killing was supposedly done by our woman agent, April Dancer."

"What!" the U.N.C.L.E. operations chief burst out, startled out of his habitual calm.

"That is the report. Do you know anything about it?"

"Nothing–yet," Waverly said.

"We have lost contact with Miss Dancer. I have Slate and Kuryakin both headed for Paris. I should have a complete report in a few hours.

"Fine. I wish you would keep me informed. This is an extremely serious matter, as you certainly know."

"I do know," Waverly said soberly.

"You understand, of course, that all of us have complete faith in your judgment. Whatever you decide to do in this matter–or any other matter–we will support you fully."

"Thank you, Jim," Waverly said quietly. "I know you will."

"You know, of course, that if international cooperation is withdrawn from us, it will make our work exceedingly difficult. It might make it impossible. We are with you all the way, but if you are wrong–well, it could mean the end of U.N.C.L.E."

"I understand that," Alexander Waverly said.

"And you still think we should challenge the peaceful intentions of this Red Chinese satellite?"

"I do," Waverly said positively, "I do not know what China's motives are with Red Satellite I. But I do know what THRUSH's motives are. It is my sincere belief that no matter what China intends, THRUSH will dominate in the end."

"If THRUSH is really in this, I certainly agree," the U.N.C.L.E. board member said. There was a strong undercurrent of worry in his cultured voice. "Do we have definite proof of THRUSH involvement?"

"The proof at the moment is insufficient to convince the United Nations officials," Waverly said. "But it is enough to convince me. In addition, before we broke communications, Miss Dancer indicated that she had found some definite evidence of great importance. I am willing to trust my future on this young woman's astuteness, Jim."

“Carry on, Alex! But somehow I feel that you are in for the hardest fight of your life.”

When the connection was broken between them Waverly reached across the communications console and reestablished contact with Napoleon Solo in Hong Kong.

“Mr. Solo,” he said, “I wish you would take the next jet back here. I need you badly.”

“Has something new come up?” Solo asked, his voice anxious.

Waverly picked up another pipe from the desk. It was a meerschaum this time. Thoughtfully he rubbed the bowl.

“We are in the exceedingly difficult position of walking a tight rope between international political traps. I can well understand international anxiety over the intentions of Red China since it developed the H-Bomb. The possibility of an atomic war has increased tenfold. Western diplomats are eager to avoid anything that might widen the rupture between East and West. They wish to give China the doubt until something definitely proves otherwise. “

“The presence of THRUSH in this thing proves otherwise to me,” Solo said positively.

Waverly laid the meerschaum on the console.

“Yes,” he said. “I am certain that THRUSH would not be involved in anything unless it advanced its own evil designs against humanity.”

“I will be leaving immediately,” Solo said.

“Excellent,” Waverly replied.

“Come here to headquarters first. I may send you on to Paris. Apparently there is where the weak THRUSH link is. If April Dancer is alive, we will be in an excellent position to strike back.”

“And if not–” Solo said quietly. “Then I will send you on to Paris to join Mr. Slate and Mr. Kuryakin. The attack on Miss Dancer definitely proves that she had found something important. That lead must be uncovered again.”

As soon as he finished his talk with Waverly via pen-communicator from Hong Kong, Napoleon Solo took a plane from Kai Tak International Airport. In Tokyo he found that Waverly had arranged for a faster U.S. Air Force jet to bring him the rest of the way.

Eleven hours after he left Kai Tak on Kowloon, Hong Kong, Napoleon Solo was walking down a street in the lower Fifties on Manhattan Island in New York. Behind him loomed the lighted bulk of the United Nations building.

He turned into a basement tailor shop in a brownstone front in the middle of the block. A girl was trying to repair the peeling gold paint that spelled “*Del Floria’s Tailor Shop*” on the window. She waved the plastic tube of glue toward the back of the shop.

"Your order is ready, Mr. Solo," she said.

"Thank you," Napoleon replied and went directly back to the dressing room.

The girl laid down the glue and went to the pressing machine, where she touched a hidden button. Immediately the back of the dressing room wall opened for Solo. He stepped into a tiny room. It went totally black as the wall closed behind him.

After infra-red scanners verified his identity, the other wall opened, permitting the chief enforcement officer to step into the U.N.C.L.E. reception room.

The pretty girl at the reception desk smiled and handed him a triangular badge. It was his passport through the super-secret corridors of U.N.C.L.E. headquarters. Without its emissions to the hundreds of secret scanners, a hundred alarms would be ringing before he took two steps out of the elevator that carried him from the lobby to the floor where Waverly's office was situated.

As he walked to this elevator, the receptionist called after him:

"Mr. Solo! Mr. Waverly is on the speaker. He is inquiring if you have arrived."

Napoleon walked back to the desk speaker.

"Solo here, sir," he said.

"Never mind coming up, Mr. Solo," Waverly said. "I have just contacted April Dancer. The situation is worse–far worse than I ever dreamed! We do not have a second to lose. Take a plane immediately to Taipei on Taiwan. You will be met there by a Mr. Chu Ching Sun. He will assist you in making arrangements with the Nationalist Chinese government of Chiang Kai-shek to fly the four of you into Communist China."

"Yes, sir," Solo said.

Curiosity gnawed at him, but he would not venture to ask what was going on. He knew that Mr. Waverly would inform him as quickly as possible.

"And, Mr. Solo–"

"Yes, sir?" Napoleon replied.

"I am sending all four of you on this mission," Waverly said. "I have never found this necessary before. But this is so grave, so terrible, so utterly devastating that we cannot afford to take any chance of failure. I am doubling our small chances of Success by sending all of you!"

FOUR
APRIL IN PARIS

In Paris April Dancer accompanied Inspector Gabin back to police headquarters. Ordinarily Gabin was friendly to the point of flirtation with the Girl from U.N.C.L.E. But tonight he sat glumly wrapped in thought as the car took them through the dark streets.

After waiting impatiently for him to explain his curious words after viewing her dead assailant, April asked for an explanation.

Gabin shrugged.

"Who knows?" he said. "One was a professional assassin we have sought for some time. The other–well, he is a man who has aroused considerable curiosity in Parisian police circles."

"Yes? April asked, her impatience stretched to the breaking point by Gabin's avoiding a direct answer to her question.

"He is believed to be the man who assassinated Prince Von Bulow, the international freelance spy, here in Paris last week," Gabin said slowly. "He also was the last person seen with Franklyn Pierce, the American nuclear scientist who quit the United States in a huff because his advanced ideas were not acted upon."

April leaned forward. Her eyes were suddenly alert. "I am most interested in what happened to Dr. Pierce."

Gabin shrugged again.

"I fear that will never be known," he said glumly. "The man who last saw him is dead, slain by you."

"I could backtrack on him. He could not have been completely alone," April said. "Who was this man? You seem to be deliberately avoiding telling me. Is that fair, Inspector Gabin? Haven't we worked closely on cases before?"

"And I hope we will again," Gabin said warmly. "But not on this one. Forget it. Go back to the United States. Forget Pierce. Forget the dead assassins. Forget everything except me, of course! I should be most desolated if that were to happen!"

"Please, Inspector!" April said impatiently. "Who is this mysterious man who tried to murder me?"

"Pao Shu Ping," Gabin said. "That in itself means nothing. But it happens to be the real name of *The Black Shadow*. You have heard of him, of course."

"Yes," April said grimly. "*The Black Shadow* is the most feared professional assassin in Asia. It was said that he never fails."

"Well, he failed this time," Gabin replied. "But I am sure he has not ceased giving trouble. You see, I recognized him from a clash we had when France still held Saigon. But I have been unable to convince anyone in the higher echelons that he really is the assassin."

"I know how that can be," April said, thinking of Alexander Waverly's troubles convincing the UN that the Red Chinese satellite in space posed a world threat.

"In fact, I was given strict orders to see that he was not interfered with by the police," Gabin went on. "You see, international relations with Red China are in a delicate state of negotiation right now. There is great fear that something will disturb them at a time when it appears that China is willing to end the war in Viet Nam. This man came to France as a member of the Red Chinese peace mission. He had diplomatic immunity. I am dead certain he murdered Prince Von Bulow, but I could not arrest him."

"I see now what the trouble is," April said.

"There will be quite a disturbance over his death. It cannot be covered up. He was shot in the chest. The newspapers will make much of it because of his connection with the peace mission."

"I can see that," April said. "Unfortunately," Gabin went on, "you are very well known, Miss Dancer. It will be impossible to cover up the fact that the Girl from U.N.C.L.E. was registered in the apartment. A lot of people are going to wonder about your connection with the peace envoy. It may prove embarrassing to U.N.C.L.E."

"It certainly will," April replied.

"I can arrange for you to talk to Waverly from my office," Gabin said. "But I cannot guarantee that you will not have the wire tapped. For that reason, I hope you will keep what I said about *The Black Shadow* in strict confidence. It is for Waverly's ears alone."

"Thank you, inspector," April said, her voice sober. "I will only report that I am alive. I'll say nothing about the other matter until I can replace my pen-communicator."

At police headquarters they were met by a secretary who informed Gabin that the *Commissionaire de Police* wished to see April Dancer. Glumly the inspector conducted April to the top official's office.

After the typically Gallic introductions had consumed more time than the impatient girl thought necessary, the commissioner got down to business.

"This is a most unfortunate affair, *Mme.* Dancer," he said. "I am quite familiar with the work of U.N.C.L.E. and of Alexander Waverly in particular. However, there is considerable political agitation about the death of this Chinese official. Our minister of Foreign Affairs has already sent a strong note of protest to the members of the U.N.C.L.E. governing board concerning your organization's interference."

"That is most unfortunate, sir," April said.

"I feel so myself*, mademoiselle*," the official said. "But it is out of my hands. This could easily upset the peace negotiations which are now going on here in Paris between representatives of the East and West. I understand also that the U.S. representative to the peace talks has wired his government a strong protest about U.N.C.L.E. activities against Red China at this time."

"Well, it wasn't *me*," April said defensively. "I didn't know who he was. He tried to kill me first."

"That, I think, everyone understands," the commissioner said. "But what they do not understand is why U.N.C.L.E. continued to concern itself with the Red Satellite at this point. It is something like the U-2 affair which broke off a summit meeting between President Eisenhower and Premier Khrushchev of Russia."

"And they are all too blind to see the terrible threat behind all this!" April cried.

"What threat?" the commissioner inquired, raising his eyebrows slightly. "There is a single satellite in space. Suppose, for sake of an argument, that it is an H-Bomb. Could that one bomb alone destroy the world? Hardly! If a threat develops, or if Red China starts putting a large number into space, then you may rest assured there will be action."

"Can't anyone understand that THRUSH is mixed up in this?" April cried. "That changes everything."

"Does it?" the commissioner asked.

April sighed and clinched her hands in frustration. "May I call Mr. Waverly?" she asked.

The police official nodded.

Mindful of Inspector Gabin's warning, April contented herself with just informing Waverly by trans-Atlantic phone that she was safe.

The U.N.C.L.E. operations chief understood her position. He simply expressed his concern for her narrow escape.

Following this call, April Dancer received a vigorous interrogation from officials of the French Foreign Ministry. Throughout the questioning she kept insisting that the attack on her was due to a misunderstanding by her attackers. She had been engaged in no investigation that remotely concerned them.

They released her after about two hours, with the pointed suggestion that reservations had been made for her on a plane for New York. Both Mark Slate, her usual partner, and Illya Kuryakin, who ordinarily worked with Napoleon Solo, were waiting for her.

Except for a few words of greeting the three from U.N.C.L.E. were silent until the cab dropped them at a hotel on Rue de Lafayette where the two men had previously arranged for her a room.

Once inside they checked the room carefully for bugs and planted microphones. They found three. After these had been inactivated, Mark Slate turned on water in the bath tub and raised the volume all the TV set with these to confuse any directed amplifiers that might be tuned in on their conversation, the girl and men from U.N.C.L.E. sat down to talk.

April Dancer was a self-sufficient young woman, well able to take

care of herself in any situation. However, the presence of her two fellow members of U.N.C.L.E. was a distinct lift to her spirits. Mark Slate, dreamy-eyed and dressed in overly loud Carnaby Street clothes, sprawled back in a slouch that disguised the athletic body that not long before had made him a member of the British Olympic ski team.

The Russian Illya Kuryakin sat across from them. His Slavic features were settled in a deceptive unconcerned mask. Blond like Mark Slate, he had the same ragged non-haircut.

Kuryakin passed her his pen-communicator to report to Alexander Waverly in U.N.C.L.E. headquarters, New York. Waverly acknowledged her call almost instantly.

"I'm sorry if I've caused you trouble," she said contritely.

"No trouble," he replied firmly.

"What happened?"

She described the attack at the apartment, including the identity of the dead men.

"I can understand now why Paris was so disturbed," Waverly said.

"We are going ahead, aren't we?" Kuryakin asked, somewhat anxiously.

"That depends upon what April has to tell us," Waverly replied. "When the attack came she was going to tell us something of the utmost importance."

"Yes, sir," the Girl from U.N.C.L.E. said quickly. "When I was checking on the possible connection of Francoise LeBrun with THRUSH I discovered that he met with Franklyn Pierce in Paris soon after the nuclear scientist defected from the U.S.! You know Washington reported that Pierce knew no atomic weapon secrets. In checking back on him I found his defection was caused by his resentment when Air Force evaluators laughed at his idea for an *orbiting H-Bomb*. They claimed that it was more practical to hit a target from earth with a rocket than to try and reenter one from space."

"That is true," Waverly said.

"That is why no one is orbiting atomic bombs. It is why UN officials tell me the Red Satellite I is no threat to earth."

"Then why do you believe it a threat, sir?" Illya Kuryakin put in via April's pen-communicator by bending his head close to hers.

"Because THRUSH is involved. I don't know how the threat is to be accomplished, but if THRUSH is involved there is a threat. I'd stake my life on it."

"Well, sir," April said. "I learned that Pierce's original plan was not to orbit single bombs because, like you said, they can be delivered more precisely by intercontinental ballistic missiles. He wanted to orbit *clusters*."

"Clusters?" Waverly repeated.

Mark Slate came out of his slouch, sitting bolt right. Illya Kuryakin's face turned grim. He turned to look at Slate. His eyebrows lifted questioningly. Slate nodded shortly.

"Yes, sir," April said. "It called for orbiting not a giant H-bomb but as many clustered baby bombs as possible. He claimed as many as fifteen with the power of the Hiroshima bomb could be orbited in one casing. At the moment of firing they would all be pre-directed to a predetermined orbit–*each one falling on a different city!"*

"Good heavens!" Waverly cried.

"If this idea works and he has joined THRUSH and Red China, that Red Satellite I could knock out every capital city in the Western hemisphere!"

"If properly scattered," Illya said, "one such cluster bomb would completely immobilize half the world!"

"I believe improved bombs of the Hiroshima size would immobilize a city ten miles in all directions from ground zero," Alexander Waverly said.

"If fifteen could be packed in a cluster," Illya Kuryakin added, "they could definitely knock out every major capital from Moscow to Washington."

"We do not know that this is what is behind Red Satellite I," Waverly said, "but it is a definite possibility. You see, when China exploded its H-bomb, experts said it constituted no threat to the Western world because China did not have an ICBM capability to deliver these bombs in quantity necessary for war. This is true.

"But," Waverly went on, a tinge of excitement coloring his habitually calm voice, "this will permit them to advance their timetable by ten years and attack *now*!"

"How did they get the thing up there anyway?" Mark Slate asked.

"When Red China announced it wanted to participate in peaceful space exploration, both Russia and the United States offered assistance," Waverly said, "They thought it would help lessen world tension."

"And the result is a THRUSH stinger hidden under the peaceful cover," April said.

"And do you know," Waverly said thoughtfully, "I suspect that in the end China will find itself doublecrossed. THRUSH is not about to share any world conquest with any nation. China, whether she knows it or not, is as much in danger as the rest of us."

"I think–"April began.

"One moment please," Waverly said. "I have an emergency message."

He pressed a blinking red button on the communications console in

New York. In Paris the other three heard a woman's voice say, "Mr. Waverly, you asked to be notified if any information was received about Red Satellite 1."

"Yes, yes!" Waverly said. "What is it?"

"China has just announced that it has placed a twin, Red Star II, in orbit also. It is circling the planet on the opposite side of the earth from Satellite 1."

"Thank you," Waverly said, a slight tremor betraying his shock. Then, into the circuit to Paris, he added, "Gentlemen, and Miss Dancer, this means that these would-be world conquerors can hit both the eastern and the western hemispheres!"

"Do you think the United Nations will believe you now?" April asked.

"I doubt it," Waverly said. "But we will not wait for the world to realize the terrible atomic threat it faces. Such a wait will be fatal for all of us."

"Then we will go it alone?" April asked.

"Yes!" Waverly said. "No matter what political pressure is put upon us. If I am wrong–it is the end of U.N.C.L.E.! But if I am right, it is worth the risk!"

"Shall we join you in New York?" Illya asked.

"No, separate to confuse any of the enemy who might be watching you. Then get to Taipei and join Mr. Solo as quickly as you can. Millions of lives and avoiding the terrors of atomic war depend on you now!"

FIVE

TERROR IN TAPEI!

It was night when Napoleon Solo landed in Taipei at the International Airport. He waited around the airport lobby for several minutes, hoping that his contact would meet him. Finally when it became apparent that nobody would, Napoleon took a taxi to the Golden Dragon hotel, where he had wired for reservations.

The place, built for a largely non-existent tourist trade, was like something out of old China. Solo almost expected to see the Dowager Empress enthroned behind the lobby desk. The old man who conducted him to his room looked like something directly out of Fu Manchu.

As the old man started to withdraw, after showing Napoleon to the room, he hesitated. In completely unaccented English he said: "I will be back as soon as it is safe."

The humility of a Chinese servant in the Orient momentarily disappeared from his voice. He spoke as one speaks to an equal.

Napoleon's well-schooled face did not betray his surprise.

“Of course–Mr. Chu, is it?”

“Chu,” the old man said and started to pull the door shut behind him.

It closed all but a crack when he suddenly stopped. Solo, suspicious of any action even slightly out of the ordinary, slipped his hand inside his jacket to feel the reassuring grip of the U.N.C.L.E. Special in its shoulder holster.

The door swung in. Mr. Chu crumpled and fell to his knees. For a second he clung to the ornate door knob. Then he collapsed on the thick rug. A golden dragon woven into a tapestry on the hall wall looked down at him with a cruel, unblinking stare.

Solo only barely glimpsed the glitter of light on the curiously carved knife handle protruding from the old man’s back as he threw himself to the floor.

There was a brief flash of a kimono through the open door. A twin to the knife in the dead man’s back hurtled through the air in a direct line for Solo’s face.

Napoleon jerked back and a second blade skimmed his cheek as it came from the open moon window behind him.

He kicked over a heavily carved teak table to protect his back and faced the window as the greater threat.

All he could see was a dark form through the lacquered lattice that screened the huge circular window. He saw what appeared to be a gun in the man’s hand. But it gave a hiss instead of a bang and another knife flashed out of the hand launcher.

Solo switched his U.N.C.L.E. Special cartridge selector from steel slugs to the needle-thin paralyzing pellets with a practiced flip of his thumb. With his first shot he caught the knife-wielding assassin in the chest.

He whirled to face the one at the door. He could not see the killer’s position because of the overturned table. Doubled up as he was, Napoleon was in a difficult position to move rapidly. That, he knew, could well be fatal in this desperate situation.

Gripping the U.N.C.L.E. Special in his right hand, he jerked off his shoe with the left. Bracing himself for a fast rise, he skimmed the shoe to the right.

Gambling that the sudden movement would pull his stalker’s attention, Solo threw himself in the opposite direction.

Instantly it flashed in his mind that he had made a fatal mistake. The killer had not been taken in. As Solo jerked his head around the side of the overturned table, he saw the looming form of the knife man. The launcher in his clawish hand was pointed straight at Solo.

Napoleon tried to bring his gun up fast enough to beat the other’s shot. He knew he had no chance!

He fired anyway. His hasty shot went over the killer's shoulder. But strangely, the man did not shoot back. His knees sagged under the floor-length man's kimono. He pitched forward on his face. The knife-launcher in his hand slipped across the rug. The tip of the blade in the gun-like barrel glittered wickedly.

Solo's eyes lifted from the dying man to the door. A girl was pushing it shut behind her. Solo was certain that she had shot the assassin, but he could see no sign of a weapon in her hand. Nor had she dropped it on the rug.

She closed the door and stood leaning against it, staring straight at him. He stared back at her in wonder. It irrelevantly flashed through his mind that he had more to stare at than she did.

She was what Old China called "the Willow and the Moon." Her body, delightfully outlined by the revealing *cheongsam* split on the sides all the way to her hips, was slender and supple as a willow. Her face had the placid and round beauty which the Chinese poets likened to the moon rising full on a summer evening.

There was about her eyes, however, a smoldering spark that belied the calm temperament displayed by her lovely face. She gave Solo the uneasy feeling that here was a woman who could love or kill with equal passion.

"Good evening, Mr. Solo," she said in accent less English.

There was a chiming quality in her voice that somehow made him think of distant temple bells ringing softly through evening gloom.

"It is good to know that you are here," he said.

The all too obvious admiration mirrored on his face caused a faint flush to twist the girl's features.

"This is strictly business, Mr. Solo!"

The bells in her voice changed from soft bronze to ringing iron.

Solo smiled grimly and looked down at the two dead men, the old Chinese and the man she had killed.

"Rather bloody business, I'd say," he remarked softly.

She shrugged her slender shoulders.

"Blood is messy," she said indifferently. "But often necessary."

"I am sorry," Solo said. "I have forgotten my manners. The sight of such beauty–"

"Please, Mr. Solo!" she snapped, her dark eyes flashing. "I have a mirror. I am well aware of what I look like. Can we save time by passing over an enumeration of my so-called charms?"

Solo grimaced. "May I–" he began.

"I hardly think so," she said. "Just let me say that the matter you were to see Mr. Chu about has been arranged. You will contact a man in Tainan who will see that you are put aboard a Nationalist Chinese Air Force reconnaissance plane which will drop you in Communist

China."

"And how will I recognize this man?" Solo asked.

"It isn't necessary," she said. "He will know you."

"Doesn't that make it rather one-sided?" Napoleon asked.

"Perhaps," she replied. "But if it is disagreeable to you, you can always return to the States, to your pipe and carpet slippers, Mr. Solo."

"Oh, I think I'd rather stay in Taiwan with you."

Her eyes were frosty. "Stay in Taiwan, if you please, but without me. Now, if you please, don't bother about the bodies. They will be removed for you. There will be no police investigation. Everything will be taken care of."

"How convenient," Solo said.

"Yes, isn't it," she said indifferently. "Good-by, Mr. Solo."

"Wait!" the U.N.C.L.E. agent said hastily.

She paused with her hand on the ornate bronze doorknob.

"I don't know who you are," he said.

"It doesn't matter."

"I think it does," Solo said quietly, but his eyes were as hard as her own. "I do not follow just anyone, regardless of the fact she may rival both the moon and the willow in loveliness. A smart trapper baits for rats with cheese–for men he uses beauty."

For the first time since she came into the room, she regarded Solo with something that halfway resembled favor.

"Mr. Chu was to make the arrangements for you. He is dead. It is my job to carry on for him."

"Why you?"

"Because Mr. Chu was my father."

Solo's eyes narrowed slightly.

Chu was dead there on the floor at their feet. She did not seem disturbed about it.

The girl seemed to read his thought. She gave him a steady look.

"When I cry, I cry alone," she said and slowly closed the door in Napoleon Solo's face.

SIX
WALKING THROUGH WALLS

Napoleon Solo scarcely had time to go through the pockets of the dead assassin before two silent men came to bear the corpses away. While the room was being straightened and the blood cleaned up, Napoleon went down to the lobby.

An inquiry about the girl produced nothing. The desk clerk denied seeing her. A generous tip to a bellhop produced nothing either. Later

Napoleon wandered around to the back. More tipping likewise brought no information. Apparently the girl had some secret way in and out of the place. Likewise, guarded inquiries about Mr. Chu brought only polite, but equally blank looks.

He finally turned in for the night. It seemed that he had but touched the pillow when the bedside phone shrilled in his ear. He sat up instantly, his hand automatically sliding under the pillow to close on the U.N.C.L.E. Special. Light streaming in through the moon window showed that he had slept longer than he thought.

"Mr. Solo?"

It was a woman's voice and it carried the chimes of distant temple bells in the evening mist.

"Yes!" Napoleon said eagerly.

"Could you come to room three hundred and two, please?"

"I will be delighted!" he said quickly.

Her voice turned cold. "I will not be there myself!"

"Oh!" Napoleon said and grimaced. "That correspondence course guaranteed me a pleasing personality. Oh, well–"

He dressed hurriedly and walked up the stairs to the third floor. The hall boy sat impassively at his desk, seeing everything, but appearing to see nothing. He saw very clearly the bill Solo dropped in front of him. It disappeared into his sleeve with a speed that was close to miraculous.

"Who is registered in Room three hundred and two?" Solo asked in a low voice.

"An American lady," the boy replied.

"Pretty?"

The boy shrugged. "Beauty, the wise ones say, lies only in the eyes of the beholder."

"In other words, you are too polite to say she looks like hell," Solo observed.

He walked down to 302. He rapped lightly and stepped back. He pulled his U.N.C.L.E. Special from its shoulder holster.

There was a short wait. Then the door opened. A woman blinked at him from behind horn-rimmed glasses perched far down on her nose.

"Oh, my goodness!" she said breathlessly. "Is that gun real?"

Napoleon smiled grimly as his eyes swept from her hair, pulled up in an unbecoming bun, down along the lineless lines of an out-of-fashion dress to flat heeled shoes.

"Yes," he said, "the gun is real, but you aren't! My dear, in a Paris frock or a potato sack you will still look like April Dancer to me!"

"Stop being funny!" she said. "I am Miss Cynthia Cavendish, a schoolteacher on vacation.

Solo stepped inside and closed the door. “A teacher, huh? What can you teach me?”

“What can I teach you that you haven’t already learned from that whatever-she is in that skirt split way past anything I’d have nerve enough to wear?”

“Oh! You’ve met her too!”

“Who is she’?”

“Not what she claims to be,” Solo said. “But she must be on our side. She kept me from being shot.”

“The same thing happened to me,” April Dancer replied, peering owlishly at him through the spectacles. “I was cornered at the airport by a couple of Red Chinese spies. I’m not sure I really needed her help, but it was decidedly welcome.”

“No one around here knows anything about her,” Napoleon said.

“She is a surprise to Mr. Waverly,” April said. “I called him about her.”

“I wonder if she is helping us just to allay our suspicions,” Solo said thoughtfully. “The Communists aren’t above sacrificing a few people for a purpose. I wonder–”

“Mr. Waverly is checking on her,” April said. “How did you know I was here?”

“She called me.”

“Then she must have followed me from the airport. I thought I left her there.”

Before Solo could reply there was a faint bleep from the silver fountain pen clipped to the bodice of April’s spinsterish dress. She quickly removed the pen and extended the antenna to convert it into the famous pen-communicator.

“April Dancer here, sir,” she said crisply.

“Miss Dancer,” Waverly’s voice said from New York. “We have checked. Mr. Chu has a daughter. Quite a lovely girl, I understand. She has worked very closely with her father in the past.”

“Thank you, sir,” April said. “That is a great relief.”

“I have also had inquiries about the young lady from both Mr. Slate and Mr. Kuryakin,” Waverly said.

“She gets around,” April observed.

“Apparently,” Waverly said.

“Can you pass along the information I just gave you about her to those gentlemen when you see them?”

“Certainly, sir,” April said. “And you might also add to Mr. Kuryakin,” Waverly said, “that I do not know the lady’s phone number. That he must find out for himself!”

“I’ll tell him, sir,” April said. “Mr. Solo is here. Do you have anything for him?”

"Yes," Waverly said. "Mr. Solo?"

"Yes, sir," Napoleon said into his own pen communicator.

"We have received additional information that THRUSH is in a state of great excitement," the U.N.C.L.E. operations chief said. "This is proof to me that they place great hope on the outcome of this affair."

"I am sure that we are right, sir."

"Before Mr. Chu was killed, did he give you final instructions?"

"No, sir."

"His daughter mentioned nothing?"

"No, sir."

"Despite the automatic coders and decoders built into our pen-communicator system, I dislike discussing something so vital over the air," Waverly said. "If you do not receive instructions soon from Chu's daughter, then I will dispatch a messenger from New York. I hope it will not be necessary."

"The old man may not have confided in his daughter, sir," April said.

"Perhaps," Waverly said. "I wish we had more time. There is always the possibility of making a mistake when you must rush into something. And this is one affair where the slightest misstep could destroy U.N.C.L.E."

April Dancer turned to Napoleon Solo. "Well," she said, pushing down the antenna to cut off the pen communicator, "what do we do now?"

"How about dinner?"

"Are you sure you wouldn't rather dine with that Chinese beauty than with a spinsterish schoolteacher?" April asked.

"With you, of course!" Napoleon said with a rakish grin.

"And if she were here instead of me?" April asked.

"I'd tell her she was the only one, naturally!" Napoleon said, his smile flashing. "Lying is the only way to get along with a girl!"

"Except that some women have the ability to spot a charming liar as far as she can see him!"

The voice–it was still bell-like, but it was harsh iron bells now–spoke behind them. The two from U.N.C.L.E. whirled to see the Chinese girl standing in the far corner of the room. She had changed her dress. This one had a golden dragon embroidered in a spiral across the front. As she breathed the rise and fall caused light to run down the golden threads so the dragon appeared to be alive itself.

"I'd give a pretty penny to have your ability to walk through walls," Napoleon said.

She gave him the wisp of a smile.

"It is very simple, Mr. Solo," she said. "The workmen who built

this tourist palace worked little secret passages into the plan for future use in a sort of personal lend-lease program–without the tourists being aware that they were lending. It is my good fortune to know the secret. That is why I had Miss Dancer located in this room. It will permit us to leave without being observed."

"Where are we going?" April asked.

The Chinese beauty shifted her eyes from Solo to April Dancer. She gave the Girl from U.N.C.L.E. a steady stare that seemed to Solo to hold a slight touch of wariness.

"On the first step as directed by your secret orders," the girl said. "The orders your Mr. Waverly just discussed with you."

"This kid must be an U.N.C.L.E. undercover agent," Solo said.

April only gave the Chinese girl a steady, thoughtful stare.

"If you please," the girl said. She pushed against a section of the paneled wall. It moved in just enough to permit them to squeeze through.

"These hotel thieves must have been midgets," Solo said as he wiggled his way through the narrow space between the walls.

"Be quiet" the Chinese girl said. "Someone may hear you through the walls. We are passing other rooms now."

They squeezed down to the ground floor and then had to crawl through a tunnel to come out in a section of the park overlooking the Keelung River as it snaked through Taipei.

For the first time the Chinese girl appeared nervous.

"Wait here," she whispered. "I must check to make sure that we can pass safely. Do not even breathe if you can help it. You are in the most mortal danger. They are looking everywhere for you."

"Who?" April asked.

"The men from Peiping," she replied. "The spy master is furious because they failed to kill Mr. Solo last night. He has threatened that those concerned with another failure will be shot."

"How did Peiping know we are here?" April asked.

"Peiping knows everything," the Chinese girl replied.

"Everything?" April repeated.

"*Everything*!" the girl insisted.

"And it could well mean your deaths unless you are extremely lucky!"

SEVEN

BETRAYED?

To April Dancer and Napoleon Solo, jammed in the narrow confines of the tunnel, it seemed that the Chinese girl had been gone for ages. It was hot. The moist earth smelled like the interior of an ancient grave.

"If I'm going to be buried, I'd prefer it done after I'm dead," Solo grumbled. "I've waited just about as long as I'm going to. If she doesn't come back soon, I'm–"

"Napoleon! What was that?" April interrupted.

"I didn't hear anything."

"It sounded like a scream in the distance," April said.

The earth suddenly buckled beneath them. A shock wave came rolling down the tunnel upon them. It knocked Solo back against April. Dirt from the top of the hole came cascading down upon them. The earth kept shaking.

"An earthquake!" April gasped as the collapsing tunnel roof half covered them.

"No!" Solo choked out the word. "It was an explosion!"

"We have to get out of here. Peiping killers or no," April said hurriedly. "If the rest of roof falls in, we've had it."

"Go ahead," Solo said. "I'll follow as soon as I can get my legs loose."

April dug in her pack and came out with a flashlight no larger than an old fashioned match stick. Another masterpiece from the U.N.C.L.E. labs, it threw a beam as powerful as a larger flashlight.

The light moved across Solo, buried to the waist in dirt.

Anxiously April swept the light overhead to get some idea how the ceiling was holding. She knew it was going to take several minutes to dig Napoleon out. He was buried deeper than he had indicated. The rescue was complicated because of the narrowness of the tunnel. It was difficult for her to get in a position to help him dig at the dirt.

The moving beam of light showed the top of the tunnel to be fairly solid.

"I think it will hold unless there is another explosion," April said.

"I think you should get out," Napoleon said. "I can work my way out eventually. We can't take a chance on both of us getting killed."

"I think the ceiling will hold," April said.

Solo's voice turned hard. "April, we've been friends for a long time and shared some tough adventures together. But friendship has

nothing to do with it. We absolutely cannot afford to risk both our lives. The mission is more important than either of us. I'd leave, much as it would hurt me, if our positions were reversed."

"You're right, Napoleon," April said in a small voice. "Thanks for reminding me–and I hate you for doing it!"

"Tell me about it over a plate of chop suey later," he said.

"It's a date," she said.

After giving his hand a hard grip, she started to crawl down the tunnel. She did not know exactly how far it was to the end. The Chinese girl had left them where she did because the tunnel was slightly wider there and made a better place to wait. Then their guide had gone on to make sure it was safe for them to leave.

As she crawled forward, April Dancer wondered what had happened to the Chinese girl. Possibly it wasn't safe for them to go out in the open. After all it was mid-morning and broad daylight, but April thought the girl could have relieved their anxiety by coming back to tell them there would be a delay.

The tunnel suddenly curved sharply. A short distance ahead April saw a dull gleam of light. She moved on as quickly as she could and found the light came from cracks in heavy boards that formed a door over the tunnel entrance.

She put her eye to one of the cracks. She saw what appeared to be a room in a dilapidated shack. As best she could tell, the room was empty.

She placed her hands against the makeshift door and pushed. It did not so much as tremble. Worried now, she turned around and put her feet against it. She pushed with all her strength, but the door remained solid.

She backed off to survey the situation. In her purse, along with numerous other of the sub-miniaturized U.N.C.L.E. safety devices, she had some "pill explosives." No larger than children's aspirin, they had sufficient power to knock down a wall.

Unfortunately she had to abandon the idea of using one now. The explosion might bring down the rest of the ceiling, completely burying Napoleon Solo. Equally important, the noise would give them away. If the Chinese girl was correct, this could mean their death.

She crawled back to Solo. He was laboriously scooping handfuls of dirt from about his imprisoned torso and pushing it back.

"We're locked in, Napoleon," she told him.

April quickly described the blockade.

"Despite Waverly's checkout on her I wonder about that girl," Napoleon grunted as he clawed away at the dirt.

"Do you smell smoke?" April asked, lifting her head.

"Yes, I do," Napoleon said. "I think that explosion was in the hotel.

What we are smelling is smoke from the resulting fire being sucked down the tunnel."

"That was a terrific jolt," April said. "If it was the hotel, I doubt that anything is left standing."

"Maybe this daughter of Fu Manchu knew what she was doing when she smuggled us out," Napoleon said as he kept clawing at the dirt.

"I think she knows very well what she is doing," April said. "She is obviously as capable as she is beautiful, much as I hate to admit either!"

"The smoke is getting stronger," Solo said. His tone grew flatter, an indication to April that he was getting more worried.

A particularly strong cloud engulfed them, leaving both coughing and with smarting eyes.

"This passageway begins on the third floor," April said between bouts of coughing. "If that place is burning down there'll be sufficient pressure to force enough smoke down here to suffocate us!"

"You're not telling me a thing I don't know!" Solo said, redoubling his efforts to dig himself out. "Look, April, get back to that door. Blow it down, if you must. I know it's sure to attract attention, but you can face that trouble when it comes. You've got to get out of here."

"It won't work Napoleon," April said. She broke up in a violent fit of coughing as more smoke clouded down upon them. "Remember, I've seen that door. You haven't. A charge big enough to blow it down would bring the ceiling down on me. I'd be buried worse than you are now."

"The smoke is getting worse, April," Napoleon said.

For a moment they were both so overcome with coughing that neither could speak.

Then when he could get the words out, Napoleon added, "Regardless, April, you've got to try. Being buried is no worse than suffocating. "

The smoke was swirling down the tunnel, pushed by heat pressure from the blazing hotel and pulled by suction through the cracks in the barrier door.

That door, she knew, was impossible for her to move. A bomb blast in the narrow confines would be fatal. They were damned to destruction either way.

She decided it was better to die trying to do something than to crouch there beside Solo's half-buried body and strangle from the smoke.

She started back to the barricaded tunnel's end, but before she had gone three feet, she suddenly changed her mind. She crawled back to Napoleon.

"Go on!" he gasped to her. "Forget about me!"

"I've forgotten you!" she replied through her own coughs. "But not U.N.C.L.E. We have to get out of here, Napoleon!"

Pulling herself up as much as possible on the mound of dirt that still imprisoned her companion, she tried to see past him.

Solo's body and the dirt blocked most of the passage way so she could not wriggle past.

She threw the beam of the match-light torch down the tunnel. Her eyes were streaming so badly she could see nothing. She pulled up the hem of her dress and wiped them.

There was a momentary break in the swirling smoke. The light showed that the ceiling had partially collapsed all along the line. The way was so choked with fallen dirt that it would be impossible for a human body to drag its way through–even if it were desirable.

The thieves had been content with just creating a burrow to get in and out of the hotel. No shoring of any kind had been put in the tunnel.

The smoke came rolling back–thicker than before. April started coughing again. Her shoulder was touching Solo's back. She could feel the agonized heave of his body. She knew they only had minutes left to live.

Unless–

She flashed the sub-miniature torch back down the tunnel. She could see nothing now. Her eyes were streaming too badly.

Blindly, she tried to form an accurate image in her mind of the dirt piles knocked down by the heaving of the explosion. It seemed to her that the largest of the ones she had seen was the third one down.

April dropped the useless light.

She pulled up her gun. It was the completely desperate act of a trapped person with all other hope gone.

She closed her eyes tightly to keep out the agonizing sting of the thickening smoke. In her mind she tried to recreate the exact view of the tunnel. Her aim had to be exactly right or they would suffocate from falling dirt instead of smoke.

She aimed at a point in the tunnel ceiling directly above where she estimated the largest pile of fallen dirt to be.

She was coughing so badly she couldn't hold the gun steady. Laboriously she brought her other hand around, touching Napoleon's back with her elbow because of the jammed room.

She grabbed the gun butt with both hands. One elbow she rammed into the dirt. The other was dug deep into Napoleon's back. He made no protest. He seemed to realize what April Dancer was attempting.

The gun exploded. The noise was deafening in the narrow confines. The bullet plowed into the ceiling above the largest mounds perfectly

placed as if the girl could see. The loose dirt gave way. She could hear it fall.

She fired again. More dirt came cascading down, building up the mound, gradually choking the tunnel.

She fired again.

The tunnel shook slightly from the shock of the falling earth, where her bullets triggered movement of the soft ground.

The shock moved along the roof of the tunnel. This was what she dreaded most. She had no doubt but that her shots would dislodge enough of the unstable earth to block the tunnel and keep out the smoke.

But would the shock of the falling earth trigger a collapse over them?

She started to claw at the dirt imprisoning Napoleon, aiding him in his struggle against death.

The smoke was clearing now that the tunnel was blocked between them and the fire in the hotel, but dirt kept falling on top of them. It seemed to April Dancer that two handfuls fell for each one she clawed away.

EIGHT
SPIES FROM PEIPING

But at the moment of April Dancer's blackest despair, Napoleon Solo gave her fresh courage.

"I've got a knee free!" he said. "Now I can get some leverage. Stop trying to dig. Crawl back and pull on my shoulders. Now that I can push with one of my legs, I think we can make it now."

April was too out of breath from her exertions to reply. She started to crawl back, but before they could put their plan into operation, she heard the heavy creak from the open end of the tunnel.

"Someone is opening the barrier door," she gasped back to Solo.

"The China Doll coming back?" he suggested.

"Where did I drop the match-light?" she said.

"Here it is," Napoleon said, passing the miniature torch to her.

Grasping it in her left hand and the U.N.C.L.E. Special in the other, she waited in the dark.

"There are voices," she whispered back to Napoleon. "Men's voices. They're talking a dialect I can't understand."

"I can only catch a word here and there," Solo said. "They aren't friendly, April. I caught the words, 'foreign devils.'"

April slid the selector on the U.N.C.L.E. Special from bullets to the paralyzing pellets. They would not strike with as much force as the slugs. There would be less chance of bringing more of the roof down

on them.

"One of them is urging the other to go on," Solo whispered.

April could hear a scrambling noise. The tunnel was only tall enough to crawl through. The newcomers would be at a disadvantage.

She heard the scramble of the newcomer's knees in the dirt as he came around the bend of the tunnel. Her thumb flicked the light switch. The powerful beam struck the surprised face of a Chinese coolie type. Before the man could jerk back, the paralyzing pellet from April's U.N.C.L.E. bullet smashed into his cheek.

There was a wild babel of voices from behind him. The screaming voices sounded like at least two more men.

"I'm free now," Napoleon's voice whispered behind her. "We had better rush them while they are off balance."

April Dancer nodded. She kept inching forward. The tunnel was so narrow that Solo could not get past her. She ignored his suggestion that she try to let him squeeze past.

She reached the sharp turn. The prone body of the Chinese blocked her way. She raised her head cautiously. A gun fired from the mouth of the tunnel. The bullet was low and smashed into the paralyzed man.

April snaked her gun over the dying man's body. She pulled the trigger. In the distance a man screamed. There was a heavy noise like a body falling. An excited voice yelled something she could not understand.

April raised her head cautiously. She could see the open tunnel door, but could not see the other man. She started to snake her body over the dead Chinese.

She got halfway–and stuck. She was jammed in by the dirt roof and the body she was trying to go over.

"Help me" she whispered back in agitation to Solo. "Push!"

Then she saw the form of a man. He had a gun in his hand, but he whirled in the opposite direction. He fired, but his body staggered back at the instant he pulled the trigger. His own shot went into the ceiling of the dilapidated shack. He fell with his head striking the edge of the door. April could see blood welling from the bullet hole in his chest.

"Push!" she whispered back to Napoleon Solo.

She wiggled frantically, pulling with all her strength as Solo pushed from behind. Slowly she started to force herself through. Then she started to inch forward, her gun ready to fire.

The person who killed the Chinese did not come into view. Instead a voice said: "Mr. Solo?"

It was the bell-like tones of the Chinese girl.

"We're here," April replied. "But just barely!"

The Chinese girl bent down so she could see into the tunnel.

"I am sorry for your trouble," she said. "But it is for the best. Had you stayed in the hotel, you would be dead now. It has been destroyed by them in an attempt to kill you."

"I understand," April said. Then, back over her shoulder she said, "Napoleon?"

"I can't get past this dead man. I'm not as small as you are," Sold said.

April inched back. There was not enough room for the other girl to come in and help. April pulled and Solo pushed at the corpse. Slowly they worked it down so Napoleon Solo could break through the trap.

April looked curiously at the dead men.

"Who are they?" she asked.

"Spies from Peiping," the girl said. "They were returning from blowing up the hotel when they heard you shooting in here. I tried to head them off, but they were too swift for me."

"We owe you a lot," Solo said. "You've saved us twice."

She shrugged.

"It is no matter," she said shortly. "It is too dangerous to take you out now. The spy master will assume you were killed in the explosion."

"We are in your hands,"

"It will be difficult," she said.

"The Red spies are stupid, but they are being aided by some very clever men from something called THRUSH. These THRUSH men fear you very much."

"I should hope so," April said. "Should we report to Mr. Waverly, Napoleon?"

Solo nodded and extended the antenna on the pen-communicator. Waverly acknowledged immediately. Napoleon hastily gave their chief a brief account of the situation.

"THRUSH will do everything in its power to eliminate you," the U.N.C.L.E. chief said. "They have all their murder facilities plus those of the Red Chinese to draw from. You face a difficult task."

"It wouldn't be fun if it wasn't tough," April said.

"Do you have any later information for us?" Napoleon inquired.

"We know THRUSH is up to something vicious," Waverly said. "Our Peiping contact is sure that THRUSH is hiding part of its operations from their Chinese partners. Planning a giant doublecross, I think. We are picking up bits of stray information that are beginning to fit into a bigger and clearer picture. It is a dark picture, Mr. Solo. It is a picture of future death, destruction and world slavery by THRUSH."

"We'll just have to stop it," Solo said. "What do we do now?"

There was a slight silence from the other end of the trans-world circuit. Then the U.N.C.L.E. operations chief said in a tone that startled his chief enforcement officer:

"You, Miss Dancer, Mr. Kuryakin, and Mr. Slate are to go into Red China. We are positive, from these bits of information I told you about, that the satellite operation is being conducted outside of Peiping."

"Is there any kind of contact for us inside China?"

"Definitely!" Waverly said. "I have talked to our U.N.C.L.E. scientists. They tell me that in all probability this cluster bomb must be set off by coded radio signals from the earth. It is your assignment, Mr. Solo, to verify this. If it is true, you are to destroy it before it destroys half the people of the world, and all the earth's freedom with it!"

"Do we have sufficient proof to go to the UN?" April Dancer asked.

Waverly said slowly, "The situation has worsened there. You know that Red China has made a vigorous protest to France about the killing of their 'diplomat' by an U.N.C.L.E. representative in Paris. France in turn has protested to the UN and has barred our operations in France. The United Nations is considering a resolution asking all its members to cease cooperation with U.N.C.L.E."

"This is terrible!" April Dancer gasped.

"But we aren't whipped yet," Waverly went on, forcing a note of optimism into his voice. "All we have to do is prove there really is a desperate world threat–and stop that threat before it can destroy us. That is your assignment, Mr. Solo. Any questions?"

"Yes, sir," Napoleon said. "How will we identify our contact in Red China?"

"By the word 'sky-star' repeated twice," Waverly said. "Once inside Red China you will be completely isolated. Do not use the pen-communicator . You are completely on your own."

"Yes, sir," Napoleon said. "And Mr. Solo–"

"Yes, sir?"

"I am sending all four of you, as I said before, because this is the most dangerous mission in U.N.C.L.E.'s history. It is inconceivable that we can win through against such terrible odds without losses on our side."

"It's part of the job, sir," Napoleon said quietly.

"Very well then," the operations chief said. "Call me again before you leave for Red China."

The Chu girl stood silently watching the two U.N.C.L.E. operatives while Solo talked to Waverly. Napoleon turned to her now.

"You knew all this?" he asked. She nodded. "My father made the arrangements for you to get into Red China. Now that he is dead, I

will carry them out for you."

"Who was your father?" Solo asked.

"He was a very important man–once. Then his name was falsely blackened by the Red Communists in China. He had to flee for his life. He would have been killed except for a young man in the diplomatic corps of a great nation. This young man became your Mr. Waverly. My father owed him a great debt. When Mr. Waverly called for his help in this matter, my father could not refuse."

"But you could have said no," April said. "Why are you helping us? Your chances of coming out of this alive are as slim as our own."

The Chinese girl gave her a straight stare. There was a flash of fire in her eyes. "Just say that I have far greater reason to hate the Peiping regime than you do."

She turned and walked swiftly to the rickety door. "I will return for you at dark," she said shortly.

It was as long a day as April Dancer had ever spent in her life.

NINE
THE SLEEP GAS

The girl–she finally reluctantly told them her name was Mei-ling–was back shortly after dusk. She led them past a small hilltop park, then down the slope, along the banks of the Keelung River. To their left a modern concrete bridge spanned the river on the road's way into the city of Taipei.

After another short walk, they entered a hovel made of many-sized and oddly-shaped packing cases. It was so close to the river that they could hear the lap of water on the shore.

The place was unutterably filthy and unused. Mei-ling removed some rubbish from the corner, exposing a trap door. They descended through it to some stone steps. The edge of the stones were encrusted with moss and had a worn look that showed they had been in place for centuries.

Mei-ling explained briefly that the steps were remains of a temple that had long since fallen in ruins. They went back into the hill for a considerable distance to a stone-walled room. A curtain hid half the room.

A guttering candle lighted the other half. It showed them a table spread with several earthen ware pots and a very old Chinese man standing behind them. He bowed slightly as they entered. She did not introduce them to him.

"First," Mei-ling explained, "you will go behind the curtain and remove your clothes. There is a vat. Kindly bathe in it, but do not let

the liquid get on your face. That must be handled more delicately. Dr. Lee will do that for you. You may go first, Miss Dancer."

While April Dancer soaked in the vat–which Mei-ling told her was a yellow skin dye–the Chinese girl removed the Girl from U.N.C.L.E.'s clothing, bringing in return a drab Chinese dress.

After she left the skin-dye bath and dressed, April took her place in a chair beside the table, while Solo went behind the curtain to immerse himself in the yellow dye. Swiftly the old man's hands removed all her makeup and then rubbed her temples with an astringent that burned fiercely.

"Never mind," Mei-ling said, although April had made no complaint. "The chemical he just placed in your skin draws the flesh tight. This has the effect of pulling up the corners of your eyes to perfectly simulate the Chinese shape. Since this is done chemically, it cannot be detected as can the usual actor's method of using tape and covering it with makeup."

After April's eyes were shaped to the make-up artist's satisfaction, he started massaging yellow color into her skin. He was still at work when a signal came from above, Mei-ling darted up the stone steps and came back with Mark Slate and Illya Kuryakin.

They looked at April Dancer without recognizing her. She waited until Mark Slate asked Mei-ling how long it would be before April and Solo arrived.

"Confucius say he who looks and sees not is a dope!" April Dancer said.

Slate looked startled, but the Russian's face never changed. After the first jolt of surprise, Slate grinned at April.

"I don't think Confucius said anything about how a smart man finding himself in a mess like this would do well to go home, crawl in bed and pull the covers over his head."

"I doubt that he did," April said.

"I wish that he had," Mark Slate replied. "And even more, I wish I had sense enough to follow his advice!"

"You don't know half how bad it is yet," April said.

"If what I suspect is in store for us, I'm getting off in a corner and having a good shiver," Illya Kuryakin said.

"It's what you suspect," April said.

She sketched for them Waverly's plan to send all four of them into Red China. Then there was no more time to talk, for Mei-ling took Kuryakin and Slate to the dye vats. When the makeup artist finally finished and Mei-ling approved his work, the four huddled for a conference.

"Four of us against all of China?" Mark Slate said. "Mr. Waverly must surely be the king of optimists."

"I think the correct figure is somewhere around five hundred million," Kuryakin said. "But let us not quibble over it."

"You can *joke* at a time like this?" Mei-ling's voice sounded half-wondering, half-exasperated.

"This *is* the time to joke," Illya said.

"Are you ready?" Mei-ling broke in impatiently.

"Lead on," Napoleon said. Silently they trailed after the Chinese girl as she led them to the river, where a sampan waited. Although they had made light of the mission back there in the shack, each of them realized fully the tremendous odds against them. The chances of success were far less than for any affair they had worked on before.

Finally after a devious route, they arrived at a back corner of the Taipei International Airport. A ramshackle Nationalist Chinese transport took them to Tainan Air Base on the south end of Taiwan. Here they were informed that they would be smuggled into Red China via Nationalist Chinese reconnaissance planes which flew regular missions over the mainland.

A Chinese lieutenant colonel reminded them that Nationalist China and Communist China were officially at war. They were subject to being shot down as soon as they got over the Chinese mainland.

"Also," he said. "You must never mention that we assisted you. Nationalist China is a member of the United Nations. We have information through diplomatic channels that certain delegates in the UN are preparing to introduce a resolution requesting all members to withdraw support and assistance to U.N.C.L.E. We do not intend to do this, but there is little point in stirring up extra trouble."

After their briefing on the air flight into China, Solo made a report to Waverly.

"Will your disguises hold up?" Waverly asked.

"They are masterpieces," Solo replied. "Illya speaks the dialect like a native. I can get by and so can April. Mark will just have to play dumb."

"Good," Waverly said. "Our information from within China is extremely sketchy. Our secret informant has pinpointed THRUSH's operations. The rockets were fired from up in Yunnan Province. However, it appears that after the firing, the THRUSH group concentrated outside of Peiping. There is a control station there. We have reason to believe it is a dummy because–to refute our claims about the sinister nature of the satellites–Peiping permitted French and Polish newspaper men to tour the site."

"Then where is the actual control site?" Solo asked.

"In Yunnan, just outside of Shunning on the Mekong River, directly north of the Burmese border. Unfortunately, our contacts there are not as extensive as they were in the Peiping–or Peking as they call it now–

area. Your job will be more difficult."

"That's good," Solo said with a wry grin. "If it were easy, April would probably quit in disgust."

"This then will be our last contact until the affair is ended," Waverly said. "Be extremely careful that all operations are directed only against sinister forces. It would be fatal for us to interfere with any project that was in fact a peaceful space experiment."

"I understand, sir," Napoleon Solo said. "Now about Mei-ling–she surprised me by saying she was going along."

"This is a surprise to me also," Waverly said. "That is your decision to make. I suppose she would be a tremendous help."

"What is her background?" Solo asked. "She has aided us immeasurably, but I know for a fact that April Dancer has never completely accepted her."

"This woman has a strong anti-Communist background. There is a price on her head in China that would keep you and me in luxury for the next hundred years. I also know that THRUSH tried to kill her on more than one occasion."

"That's good enough background for this job. She isn't apt to betray us to either of them."

"That is an excellent assumption, Mr. Solo," the U.N.C.L.E. operations chief said. "I can understand your suspicions–and appreciate them."

Oddly, it seemed to Napoleon, Mei-ling was not surprised at their change of destination. She acted as if she was under the impression they were going to Yunnan all the time.

They were two days in reaching their destination. Then another day was lost in getting in Shunning. They had to land far north of the river city. Here they were met by a young man and woman who identified themselves with the U.N.C.L.E. password. These two arranged for them to move down the Mekong River into the city. They traveled by sampan. The river was narrowed by huge gorges and the route complicated by dangerous rapids.

Their guides left them about ten miles from the town after giving them instructions on how to find their next contact.

"It is necessary that we work in relays like this," the man explained. "The Communists are searching for Ling Su and me. It would be fatal for all of us if we entered the city."

"I can appreciate that," Solo said. He extracted several gold coins from a money belt under his coolie jacket and passed them to the man.

"I have something for you too," Mei-ling suddenly spoke from the night shadows behind Napoleon. "Your just reward!"

The U.N.C.L.E. agents caught a glimpse of a tiny gun in her hand.

It made a curious *plop!* noise as the silenced bullet ripped into the guide's chest.

The girl with him gave a strangled cry. She fell on her knees in the river bank sand, pleading wildly for her life.

"What is it, Mei-ling?" Solo asked.

"We have been betrayed!" the Chinese girl said through clinched lips. "We were not supposed to have gone into the city at all. The tracking station where the orders are relayed is situated some distance down river from the town. There is no reason for us to go into the city–except to get us caught!"

"What is that smell?" April asked suddenly.

"Run!" Mei-ling cried. "It is the sleep gas! These traitorous dogs led us directly into a trap!"

She hesitated just a second to shoot the pleading girl and turned to run. April Dancer tried to follow, but her knees buckled. She toppled and collided with Illya Kuryakin. They fell in the wet sand. Directly in front of them Mark Slate reached the sampan, but collapsed before he could push it into the water. Napoleon Solo fell to his knees just three feet from them.

April's mind was in a fog. She dimly heard a voice say in English.

"Wonderful! Wonderful! Everything worked perfectly. We got the entire U.N.C.L.E. rat pack in a single snap of the trap!"

"Shall I kill them now?" another voice said. It also spoke in English, but there was in it a European accent.

"The Chinese girl, yes. Shoot her!" the American voice said. "Then take the body to the Red Chinese secret police. Tell them this is how their THRUSH friends protect their associates. There is quite a price in gold on this woman's head. Let the police chief have it. It will make him favorable to us."

"Excellent, Dr. Pierce! And the others?"

"You can have the pleasure of murdering them as well–but just a little later. First they must do an errand for me. A most important errand, such as confusing Mr. Alexander Waverly and neutralizing him as a threat to us!"

TEN
CAPTIVES

They regained consciousness in a small concrete cell that had all the appearance of a decontamination unit for a nuclear fallout shelter. They were all handcuffed on wrists and ankles.

They remained in the cell for about an hour after coming out of their drug-gas induced sleep. Sure that they were being spied upon, none of them spoke.

Finally two Europeans came and took them into an adjoining room. There was a radio transmitting set in one corner, several bunk beds reaching to the ceiling on one side, and boxes of prepared food. To April Dancer, looking around, it verified her suspicions that they were in a fallout shelter belonging to the THRUSH cell.

An American was at the radio transmitter. A grim faced European stood beside him.

"What is the situation at the tracking station, Dr. Pierce?" the European asked.

Franklyn Pierce, the American nuclear scientist defector, looked up at Hanz Tiell, his cell chief.

"The difficulty in the tracking system has cleared up. It seems now that we can proceed on schedule. We will be able to fire the bombs within the next three hours. It will take approximately an hour and a half for them to reenter. They will strike New York, London, Paris, Peking, New Delhi, Moscow, Tokyo, Vienna, Berlin, Chicago, Los Angeles, Rome, Tel Aviv, Ottawa and Sidney. The second cluster bomb will be used to mop up if necessary."

"Did you find the cause of the tracking difficulty?"

"We think it was experimental interference broadcast from the U.N.C.L.E. laboratories in New York," Pierce said.

"Can they–"

"We can override the induced static," Pierce said. "But it could cause a flutter in the aiming device that could result in missing the assigned targets."

"That would be fatal," Tiell snapped. "This system has been programmed to knock out the seats of government, including the United Nations. I want something done at once to eliminate any slight chance of U.N.C.L.E. interference!"

"That is what I'm working on," Pierce said impatiently. "While these U.N.C.L.E. rats were unconscious I had samples taken of their blood. The three men are incompatible with the hypnotic serum. The girl's system appears to be sympathetic to the chemical compound."

"You are taking a long chance," the cell chief said uneasily. "I don't think–"

"But Dr. Tiell!" Pierce said, getting up in his agitation. "It is sure to work. I know the serum has not been field tested, but it worked in the laboratory. If it doesn't, then we can cut off the transmission."

"U.N.C.L.E. will be warned," Tiell said.

"There is always a chance they can delay us. A delay can be fatal. The Chinese are becoming more and more suspicious. They are demanding that we take Chinese technicians into the tracking and control station. If that happens, nothing can prevent them from learning that we have programmed one of the bombs straight for the

Red Chinese headquarters in Peking."

Tiell took a deep, unsteady breath.

"We are working on a narrow margin," he said. "What I fear is that Waverly will finally convince the UN of the truth about the satellites being clustered. Once that happens the U.S. Strategic Air Command can hit us with ICBMs and with H-bomb warheads within an hour and a half."

"Take it easy," Pierce said.

"We'll win. It is just a matter of a few more hours and I'll have a baby H-bomb in the center of every important city in the world."

"There had better be no delays–for your sake!" Tiell rasped. "You made one bad mistake in killing that Chinese girl. I needed to question her."

"She had a gun in her hand," Pierce replied. "What should I have done? Let her shoot *me*?"

"That might have been better for us," Tiell sneered. "I am beginning to doubt you, Pierce."

"I'll deliver your damn H-bombs!" Pierce snapped. "Don't worry. I'll get the hypnosis serum now."

He walked rapidly from the room. Tiell turned and gave Napoleon Solo a sour look.

"Remember me, Napoleon?" he asked.

"I seem to recall that you came just as closely as anybody ever did to killing me once," Napoleon Solo replied.

"I expect better luck this time," the THRUSH man said.

"You haven't a chance," Solo said, desperately snatching at a bluff to throw the cell chief off guard. "I can tell you now because you haven't a chance to stop it. Mei-ling got word to her group before Pierce got her. I gave them the direction. They're moving in on you, Tiell."

The THRUSH cell chief looked at Napoleon Solo with contemptuous amusement.

"Never play poker, Napoleon," he said harshly. "You know nothing about Mei-ling. You thought she was helping U.N.C.L.E. She was leading you into a death trap after you served her purpose.

"She didn't belong to U.N.C.L.E. She was with an anti-Communist group, which is what fooled Waverly. But they were working for *themselves* only. Her object was to use you and U.N.C.L.E. to break through our defenses. Once this was accomplished, you would have been killed by her. She would have taken over direction of the cluster bombs to steal the fruits of THRUSH's work."

Pierce came back into the room. He was carrying a tray with a small syringe and a bottle of green liquid that glowed wickedly.

The three men watched helplessly as Pierce charged the syringe

with the peculiar liquid. The renegade American's hand shook slightly as he worked. Tiell, watching intently, was sweating profusely. Everyone in the room of the fallout shelter was tense, knowing how much depended on the uncertain experiment.

Oddly April Dancer, on whom the experiment was to be performed, was the calmest one in the room. This was because she had already made her plan. There was only the slightest chance that it would work but this did not deter her.

All she ever asked for was a thin margin of chance. The rest she would supply from her own resources.

Watching her intently, Mark Slate, who knew her so well, was aware that she had something in mind. He stretched his manacled legs as if to ease a cramp. He barely touched Illya Kuryakin's foot imperceptibly with the toe of his shoe.

Kuryakin looked at him. Slate was watching April intently. Kuryakin followed the direction of Slate's stare. He realized that something was in the wind. He had no idea what nor how he could assist, manacled as they all were with handcuffs about wrists and ankles.

However, he braced himself for anything he might be able to do to help her.

Suddenly April started to choke. She coughed violently. Her chin fell down on her chest. Her body heaved and she almost toppled from her chair.

"What is the matter?" Tiell cried in alarm.

Pierce dropped the filled syringe back on the tray. He sprang to April's side. The three men from U.N.C.L.E. tensed their muscles, ready to throw their bodies forward. There was a slender chance that they might assist April by using their heads as human battering rams to knock down Tiell and Pierce. Then, if they were lucky, they might get in hard kicks with their manacled feet.

These thoughts were nothing but desperate groping for some means of fighting back.

The situation was so perilous that they were practically willing to try anything.

However, if April Dancer had been trying to give them an opening for such an attack by diverting attention from them to herself, Tiell quickly scotched it before it started.

While Pierce anxiously knelt beside April, the THRUSH cell chief stepped back. He drew his THRUSH gun and covered the three prisoners.

"If she is unable to take the hypnotic serum," Pierce said in a badly worried voice, "there'll be no way to pull Waverly's fangs."

"If this is some trick–" Tiell began ominously.

“Take it easy,” Solo said. “Remember I know you from a previous affair. We know you wouldn’t fall for a kid’s trick.”

“That’s right!” the cell chief snapped. “You broke us up before through pure dumb luck! You won’t again.”

“I can believe it now,” Solo said, playing on the man’s egotism.

“Now you’re getting smart,” Tiell grunted. “Are you willing to make a deal?”

“Nothing doing!” Solo said, an edge of contempt coming into his voice. “You’re right on the brink of losing, Tiell. You expected to use April under hypnosis to send a false message to Waverly. You can’t do it now! She’s having one of her attacks!”

Blood rushed to Tiell’s face, turning it almost black. He stifled a. curse and jerked up the THRUSH gun until the muzzle leveled on Napoleon Solo’s chest.

“Help me! Help me!” April cried in a stricken voice.

Tiell hesitated for a brief second and then turned back to Solo. “I’m going to kill you!”

“*Help me!*” April cried again, the words slurring through her trembling lips. “I’ll be all right if you’ll give me my medicine from my purse!”

“Wait a minute, Tiell,” Pierce said getting up. “Maybe we can bring her out of it.”

“What is the matter with her?” the cell chief asked suspiciously.

“I’m not a doctor. Maybe she has something like diabetes. You know they have to carry insulin pills around with them.”

“In my purse!” April gasped, her body shaking all over. “Get me–”

“Try it,” Tiell said, turning away and dropping his gun aim at Solo. “It’s a chance. Where is the stuff you took from them?”

“In the locker,” Pierce said.

“They were overloaded with U.N.C.L.E. devices–pill explosives, pen-communicators, cigarette lights that are really steel-cutting blow torches and who knows what else. I wanted time to inspect the stuff carefully. “

“Well, inspect what you give her,” Tiell ordered. “This could be a trick.”

April slumped more and suddenly pitched forward out of the chair.

ELEVEN

THE SMOKE MINT

Hanz Tiell did not see April Dancer break her fall with the palms of her hands as a tumbler would do. It seemed to him that she hit the concrete with a stunning force.

The three men from U.N.C.L.E. had a different view. They knew exactly now what she had in mind. The call for "medicine" from her purse was the tipoff. Among the numerous U.N.C.L.E. protective devices carried as standard equipment by them all were packages of mints. They would pass the closest inspection without disclosing their secret–which was that they turned into tremendous smoke bombs when dropped in water.

Tiell did not come near her. He backed away, uneasily shifting the barrel of the gun from the three men to the fallen girl from U.N.C.L.E.

He had scarcely stepped back when Pierce returned with the box containing the material taken from the captives. He quickly took out April's purse and pawed through it. He brought out the package of mints. He held them up for the men to see.

"Is this it?" he asked.

"Don't ask me!" Napoleon Solo snarled. "I'm not helping you one damned bit."

"It has to be," Pierce said. "It's the only thing that answers her description."

Turning to Tiell, he asked for help in getting April Dancer up.

"Do it yourself," the chief said roughly. "I'm taking no chances. I'm staying back far enough so I can get a clear shot if there's treachery."

Solo turned his head slightly to look at his male companions. They could see the agony in his eyes. They knew he wanted as badly as they did to tell Pierce he had to drop the mint into a glass of water.

Instead the renegade American was moving his hand as if to slip it between April's lips. They knew when it hit the saliva in her mouth the mint would turn into clouds of suffocating smoke. The girl would die a terrible death. Then the smoke would choke the rest of them.

At the same time, they knew if they tried to offer instructions it would be out of character for a member of U.N.C.L.E. It would surely excite the THRUSH men's suspicions.

They looked to Solo for a sign of what to do. The chief enforcement officer sat. rigid, his face strained, waiting until the very last second to see What April might do.

As Pierce touched the smoke mint to her lips she suddenly coughed. He drew his hand back. She weakly opened her eyes.

"In–in a glass of water," she said weakly.

Pierce stood up. Mark Slate almost gasped with relief. Solo shivered in spite of his iron control. Illya Kuryakin just stared stolidly, apparently unmoved by their narrow escape.

Pierce returned with a cup of water. He sat it on the tray beside the syringe of hypnotic serum he would use on April later. He picked up the smoke mint.

Solo mentally measured the distance between himself and Hanz Tiell. He decided the distance was too far. Instead he elected to hurl his body against the table, hoping he could upset it and knock the top back against the cell chief before Tiell could use the gun on any of them.

He hoped that the two THRUSH men would take the full force of the smoke. By throwing themselves to the floor, he hoped they could escape enough of the suffocating material to permit them to snake their manacled way to the door.

Their chances of success were less than one in a thousand, Solo estimated.

The three male prisoners watched Pierce's hand as it picked up the mint. April Dancer, face down on the floor, could not observe the progress of her desperate plan.

But before the renegade American scientists could drop the mint into the cup of water, the speaker blared out on the radio transmitter behind them.

Pierce half turned as Tiell hurried to the set.

"Tiell," he said into the speaker. "What is it?"

"The Chinese are here. They are demanding that we admit their technicians to the control center," an agitated voice said.

"Stall them!" the cell chief snapped. "Three hours and it's over!"

"They won't stall anymore! The chief is suspicious. He says he will send troops to the control station and force his way in. He has orders directly from Peking!"

"You are at our center office?"

"Yes."

"Do you still have the–*means* of carrying out emergency plan A?" Tiell asked.

They saw Pierce's face pale. The renegade sucked in his breath. His body trembled slightly as he stared at the cell chief with a stricken look.

"Yes!" the voice on the radio said. "There are two bombs left over from assembling the clusters. One is set up ready to fire in basement

here. All it needs is to insert the fuse."

"Insert the fuse" Tiell ordered. "It will take you about ten minutes to get here to the shelter. Set the timer for that length of time. However, keep stalling. Don't blow up the town unless you must. And don't fire it under any circumstances without checking with me to make sure all of our THRUSH technicians are in the shelter."

"But won't the Chinese–" Pierce began.

"Shut up!" Tiell snarled. "We're fighting for our lives now!"

He adjusted the radio wave length to call on a secret channel to the tracking and control station.

"The Chinese are getting suspicious," he reported to the technician in charge. "Move up the firing schedule as much as you can."

"It is impossible to cut the countdown more than a half hour," the voice from the radio protested. "It will take at least two hours before we can release the bombs in space. It will be an hour and a half after that before they can strike the cities. "

"If I have Carnovan set off the atom bomb here in Shunning to blow up this Chinese inspection crew, will the shock disrupt your countdown?"

"No. We are fifteen miles away and there is a range of hills between us. On a ground-burst bomb the hills will block the initial radiation."

"You're right on the river. Will radiation washed down affect you much?"

"No, you can wipe out the threat in Shunning with the bomb without affecting the control station. But What about Peking? When the bomb is exploded won't they suspect something?"

"They will get a report from me of a terrible accident," Hanz Tiell said. "Sure, they'll send inspection teams. But it will be too late. By the time any plane can get here from Peking, there will be no Peking any longer! Nor a Washington, or London or Paris or Moscow, for that matter! There will only be THRUSH specially trained political teams to rush into the vacuum left by destruction of the world's governments!"

"Then go ahead," the control technical chief said. "The explosion will not affect our equipment in the least."

Tiell readjusted his secret channel transmitter to recall the cell's downtown headquarters.

"How are the Chinese taking the delay?" he asked.

"They refuse a delay!"

"Let me talk to the man in charge," Tiell said.

Once he had the head of the Chinese inspection team on the radio, Tiell's arrogance vanished. He almost groveled on the floor as he profusely apologized for the "idiocy of my underlings."

"I will come down directly and personally accompany you to the tracking station," Tiell went on.

"And you will be required to explain why we were led to believe the control would be made from what we now know is a dummy station near Peking," the Chinese Red official said coldly. "At first we thought it an U.N.C.L.E. trick when we were so informed by Alexander Waverly. An investigation proves it true. We want an explanation of your treachery now!"

"I shall certainly do so," Tiell said hastily.

He asked to have the THRUSH technician put back on. When the man answered, Tiell said, "I will be down just as soon as I can. In the meantime–"

He paused and the awful significance of it was apparent to the U.N.C.L.E. prisoners. It was clearly mirrored in the vicious half-smile that crossed Tiell's face.

"In the meantime," he went on, "please take care of our distinguished visitors."

"I understand exactly," the THRUSH man said from the other end of the connection.

Tiell turned from the radio to Pierce. "Did you hear that Chinese dog?" he said heavily. "Waverly tipped Peking that the Peking control station was a fake. How did he find that out?"

"How do I know? I tried to tell you in the beginning that U.N.C.L.E. was our greatest danger."

"I believe it," Tiell snapped.

"He must know a lot more to have sent this rat pack in here."

He turned to glare at his prisoners. Then, making a sudden decision, he said: "Go ahead. Revive April Dancer. I'm not so sure you'll get away with fooling Waverly with a fake message from her, but maybe the hypnotic effect will work like a truth serum. We might get some indication of how much U.N.C.L.E. knows."

"Okay," Pierce said.

He dropped the mint into the glass of water. It happened so rapidly, it almost caught the prisoners off-guard. For a split second bubbles rose from the descending mint. Then the cup exploded with churning smoke.

Pierce fell with a strangled cry. Tiell whirled with a frightened yell. He jerked up the gun as the smoke engulfed him. He leveled it at Napoleon Solo.

April Dancer threw herself around. Her manacled feet caught Tiell's ankles. His gun exploded into the air. He fell heavily, coughing and choking.

April was on the floor where the air was clearer. The lighter smoke

was rising. Hanz Tiell, who had taken a full lungful before he fell, was writhing and coughing. April twisted her body frantically, snaking her manacled body along the floor toward him. She did not know what the others were doing, but she was the closest to the THRUSH cell chief.

His gun had fallen from his hands when he fell. April could see it, but her hands were manacled behind her back. She twisted around and her groping fingers closed on the butt.

As she turned, she saw Solo slam his feet into Pierce's face, leaving only a bloody blob where the renegade's features had been.

Then she heard Mark Slate yell: "Tiell! He's getting away!"

April twisted around so her manacled wrists could aim the gun as best she could. She squeezed the trigger. The shot hit the wall far wide of its target. It glanced off, slamming into the floor only inches from Illya Kuryakin's head.

"We've got to get out of here!'" Solo yelled. "Or we'll suffocate too!"

TWELVE
THE H-HELL BOMB

Mark Slate moved toward April Dancer as quickly as his body could twist along the floor.

"Shoot the cuffs off my feet!" he cried.

April raised the gun behind her back. Slate raised his legs until the center of the chain between the manacles rested against the barrel of the gun.

He moved his head back out of the line of fire.

"Shoot!" he cried.

April Dancer squeezed the trigger. The slug tore into the chair and the link broke. As he got up April shot the leg manacles off Illya Kuryakin as well. Then she took care of Solo.

Shooting off the wrist manacles was more dangerous, for neither could see. She tried Solo first. The shot glanced slightly and ripped a gash across the Man from U.N.C.L.E.'s forearm.

Blood spurted, but Solo ignored it. He grabbed the gun from April's hands. With his own hands free he would work more safely.

As soon as she was free, April grabbed her purse with its precious U.N.C.L.E. protective devices and started crawling for the door. Her own tiny miniature model of the famed U.N.C.L.E. Special was inside. A smaller duplicate of the bigger gun, it had been reduced in size to permit it to be carried in her handbag for emergencies.

She crawled along the floor to escape the thickest part of the smoke. She could not see Tiell, but knew he was not far ahead of her.

It had taken only a few seconds to shoot off the manacles.

"This way!" Solo gasped.

The others started after him down the smoke-choked corridor. In the distance a gun boomed. A bullet slammed into the wall near April's head. Another came so close to killing Illya Kuryakin that it brought blood from a tear in the top of his ear.

"It's suicide to go on!" Solo gasped. "Tiell didn't have another weapon. There must be others below."

"There's another door on the opposite side of the room where we were!" April cried.

"I'm not sure we can get back through," Solo said. "The smoke is damned awful in there now."

"Shall we rush them then?" Kuryakin gasped, still partially choking from the smoke in his lungs.

"No. That's suicide," Solo said. "Back in the room. Hold your breath as long as you can. Get down on the floor. Keep your eyes closed. Prepare for a blast"

They understood what he meant when he said blast. All of them carried the miniaturized U.N.C.L.E. bombs intended for use against the satellite control station if they were lucky enough to find it.

"It's pretty close quarters to use so powerful an explosive," Slate said. "The concussion will backfire on us–"

A hail of bullets ripped through the smoke. They heard Tiell yell to his men to keep shooting. Faced with no alternative now, the U.N.C.L.E. group retreated back into the smoke filled room.

Solo was the last through the door. He turned and threw one of the pill-sized explosive packages down the corridor. Then he leaped inside and slammed the door to stop as much of the concussion as possible. He fell on the floor, eyes streaming. His lungs burned for want of oxygen as he tightly held his breath.

For a minute the THRUSH gunmen continued to pour a wild fusillade of bullets into the closed door. It was made of heavy metal and none penetrated.

Then the U.N.C.L.E. bomb went off. The floor leaped and buckled under them. The concrete walls of the shelter, obviously put up by a thieving builder who skimped on cement, split.

April Dancer was thrown heavily against Mark Slate. She could not tell what was happening to the others. Her eyes were completely blinded by the smoke.

She knew there was a door on the other side of the room, but had no idea where it led. She started to crawl toward it. Her lungs were on fire. Blood was pounding in her head. Every cell in her body was screaming for air.

The building structure was still shaking from the force of the

confined explosion. Suddenly the crack in the wall widened. There was a tremendous grinding noise and the rumble of a giant's thunder.

The wall collapsed with a roar of sliding earth. The floor under them tilted crazily. The smoke poured through the rent.

April rose up. For a moment she couldn't see. She wiped her eyes on her skirt hem. She got shakily to her feet.

"What happened?" she asked unsteadily.

"Apparently this shelter was sunk in the ground under an old temple like the place in Taiwan," Solo said, his voice broken by rasping breathing. "The explosion caused the soft ground to give away. The cheap concrete work in the shelter couldn't stand the strain."

He walked gingerly to the broken edge of the floor. Half the hill had given away, sliding down in a miniature avalanche to the edge of the Mekong River that snaked about the hill. Broken slabs of concrete stuck up from the loose dirt. As best they could see in the moonlight, none of the THRUSH people had survived. The slide had covered them all.

Their room apparently partially rested on a solid rock foundation. It had only partially slipped. Except for several bad cracks and the loss of one wall, it had survived the explosion and slide in fairly good condition.

Solo turned to face the others. "Is everybody able to travel?" he asked. "We've got to get out of here fast."

"The tracking station is downriver," April said. "At least that is what Tiell indicated in his talk."

"Then let's get moving," Mark Slate said. "I don't know how much time we have left to stop the cluster bomb firing, but whatever it is, it isn't enough!"

"I'd say, judging from Tiell's statements, we have just about two hours," Solo said.

"As best I can tell in the dark," April said, "there appears to be several sampans drawn up along the river bank. If Tiell was correct in the tracking station being fifteen miles down the river, it will take us about an hour, from the looks of the river's current."

"That will give us an hour to find some way into the place, elude the guards, and blow the place up," Illya Kuryakin said gloomily. "One hour!"

"Oh, that's plenty of time," April said with a positive note in her voice.

It caused Solo to give her a sidewise grin. "I think we had better ride on your confidence instead of my own!"

They started down the hill toward the river. Solo went first but only because he deliberately got in front of April. The others fell in

behind them.

The dirt was soft. They sank down over their ankles. It kept sliding under them.

Then suddenly the night was gone! It was brighter than any day–more brilliant than if there were two suns in the sky. There was a searing blast of heat.

"Don't look around!" April cried. She had to scream to be heard above the hellish roar that followed the initial burst of light and heat. "It's an H-bomb! THRUSH set it off after all!"

"Back to the shelter!" Solo yelled. "There's a small chance we can save ourselves yet! The hill stopped much of the first shock and radiation from hitting us. Into the shelter before the fallout comes!"

The brilliance faded as the initial fireball went out. There was still a ghastly light from the towering column of vaporized rock and dirt whose incandescent mass was being sucked into the mushroom.

The four from U.N.C.L.E. struggled to climb up the soft sliding dirt. Below them the entire world seemed on fire as flimsily constructed wooden buildings burst into flames from the thermal heat.

The mushrooming cloud pulled in the wind so rapidly that it became a gale. The flames were whipped to wild fury, lashing and eddying into a fire storm. It swept across the river below the hill. Gusts caught streamers of pure fire and hurled them like living thunderbolts through the air. Two such flaming death traps licked up the hills, almost engulfing the struggling group from U.N.C.L.E.

They almost reached the edge of the shattered fallout shelter. April was slightly in the lead. Then the soft ground gave way under her feet. Mark Slate lunged to catch her–and slipped himself. The dirt started to slide.

Kuryakin grabbed a piece of partially buried concrete and held on. The others slid halfway down before they could stop.

They pulled themselves out of the dirt and started to climb again. The hill's blockage had saved them from receiving a lethal dose of radiation when the bomb exploded. Its bulk also shielded them from being burned to a crisp from the terrible thermal heat.

But it could do nothing against the danger of nuclear fallout. They were all well-versed in the conditions to be expected in case of a nuclear war. The situation was the same here now.

They knew that a ground-burst bomb would not throw out as large an area of total destruction as one exploded in the air. But the terrible thermal heat so close to the ground would vaporize more rock and dirt and non-combustible building material than a bomb exploded in the air.

This vaporized material was being sucked up the incandescent column of the mushroom cloud. This debris would be coming back

down shortly. It would be intensely radioactive. Thus the initial lethal fallout would be greater from the ground-burst bomb.

It would rain out of the sky upon them. Nothing could prevent their death except very heavy shielding. Nothing they could hold over themselves would be sufficient.

They had to reach the fallout shelter or die a miserable, lingering death from acute radiation sickness.

The U.N.C.L.E. group started fighting their way up the hill again. The open side of the shelter yawned ahead, but it did not promise complete safety. One side had been blasted open by the U.N.C.L.E. bomb. This was wide open and too large for anything inside to be jammed into the breach. So the goal they were fighting to reach represented only a *chance* to save themselves–and perhaps a very small chance at that!

THIRTEEN
"BOMBS AWAY!"

The entire sky was ablaze as the fury of the fire storm swept across the doomed city. The four from U.N.C.L.E. kept struggling up the sliding incline. They fought for each step, aiding each other, slipping back, falling and desperately picking themselves up for still one more try.

The fire storm was fanning the flames to greater fury. As they finally reached the tilting concrete floor of the wrecked shelter, a new danger reached out hungry, fiery fingers to destroy them.

Floating piles of wreckage, knocked into the river by the blast concussion against shacks along the banks, were fired by the terrible thermal heat. The entire upriver area was ablaze. The swift current was sweeping it down opposite the hill where the four from U.N.C.L.E. fought to stay alive.

They were near collapse from the hard struggle up the sliding break in the hill. Napoleon Solo leaned against the tilting wall and looked at his haggard companions.

"The fire storm is going to pull the river flames right up the hill on top of us," he said, his voice shaking with his utter exhaustion. "We can't run any farther. There's no place to run."

"We've got to block the opening to keep the flames out," April Dancer said.

"There's nothing big enough," Mark Slate said.

"There's a door and a tunnel leading up to the place where the old temple was on top of the hill," Illya Kuryakin pointed out.

"If we open the door, it will create a suction that will bring draw fire and radioactive debris right in on top of us," Napoleon Solo

objected.

"Then bury us!" April cried. "Throw one of the pill-bombs higher up on the hill. Let the slide cover us!"

"We'll suffocate!" Slate objected. "There'll be enough air trapped in here with us to breathe for a while. By that time we can hope the fire storm will pull all the flames off the river."

Solo went to the edge where the broken concrete floor met the slide. He looked up. The wild flames from the river licked halfway up the hill. The heat was terrific.

"The top hangs over too much," he said, his voice dull with fatigue. "We can't throw the bomb around the bulge. It would start the slide too near us. This cheap concrete would collapse. We'd be killed."

"If I went down the hill a short distance, then I could throw it past the bulge," April said quickly.

"You couldn't get in fast enough. You'd be covered by the slide."

"Isn't that better than all of us burning?" she asked quietly.

"Let's flip a coin for it," Illya Kuryakin said. "That's a fair way to determine who will be sacrificed."

"Nothing doing!" April snapped. "It was my idea!"

"Stop arguing!" Solo rasped. "You'll have plenty of time for that when we get home."

"Are we going to get home?" Slate asked.

Napoleon grinned wearily. "Sure! Did you ever doubt it?"

He took a deep breath and looked down at the hellish churning flames that were climbing higher up the hill as the blaze on the river increased.

"Let's try something first before we give in to sacrificing some one of us," Solo said. "We'll form a human chain. Maybe we can pull up the bomb thrower before the slide hits."

"I'll go down," Mark Slate said quickly.

"No!" Solo got in before the others could object. "We have to leave everything out of this except consideration of our best chances to succeed.

"Mark, you have the largest hands. You're the anchor man. Get a grip on that concrete edge. Now, we don't want our heaviest on the bottom. So I'll come next. Take my hand, Illya, and go next. April, it is up to you to do the dirty work. You weigh less than any of us."

"Let's go!" she cried.

Swiftly they went into position, stretching their arms out to support each other down the hill. The toughest position of them all was that of Mark Slate. Upon his one-hand grip on the concrete edge depended all their lives.

At the moment there was not much pressure on him. Each of the

others had sunk their feet into the soft ground. The critical moment would come when his sweaty, slippery hand had to pull them to safety.

The fire storm was sweeping higher toward them. The flames were so wide spread that it seemed to Slate, looking down, that they were forming a human chain to lower April Dancer into a seething volcano.

The tiny pellet had been enclosed in a ball of damp earth before she descended. It needed weight to throw so far.

"Ready?" Solo called down to April.

She steadied herself and drew back her hand. Her face was drawn by utter fatigue, but her eyes sparkled with that genuine pleasure she always felt in moments of extreme danger.

"Ready!" she cried.

"Ready up above, Mark?" "Ready!" Slate said.

"Then brace! This is it! Go, April!"

A jerk went up the line of hands as April's body twisted with the effort of hurling the bomb. Solo was watching. The second the ball of dirt left April's hand, he yelled: "*Pull*!"

But April's feet slipped in the loose dirt. She fell. The jerk of her body was transmitted up the outstretched arms of the men from U.N.C.L.E.

Mark Slate could see it coming and braced himself. The rough concrete tore into his fingers, but he held on grimly. Blood welled through his lacerated fingertips, making it still more difficult for him to hang on.

The roar of the fire storm was so great that they scarcely heard the crash of the exploding bomb. The chain of men was moving back, pulling April Dancer, since she could not get on her feet.

Above them the hill bulged and started to slide. Napoleon got back on the tilting floor and grabbed a hold before Slate's bloody fingers slipped.

Together they pulled Kuryakin up. They didn't quite make it with April. The cascade of dirt swept across her legs. Solo let go his grip on Kuryakin's hand. He leaned over, oblivious to the huge rock that bounced over his head. He grabbed April's other hand. Together he and Illya heaved to drag the girl from U.N.C.L.E. out of the dirt before she was covered.

The avalanche continued to build up. It had almost completely blocked the opening now. A flame-cloud was hurled against the barrier. It licked hungrily into the small breech remaining.

As the sliding earth blocked off the broken side of the shelter, it posed a new danger. It started spilling into the room, driving the U.N.C.L.E. quartet back against the opposite wall.

"There is no danger of covering us," Solo said. "But the more it fills

the room, the less air space there is left for us. We could suffocate."

"How long do you think we must stay here?" April asked. "Every moment lost is moving us close to disaster. This–"

She paused to sweep her hand in an arc to include the disaster area about them.

"This will be repeated in fifteen of the world's greatest cities," she went on. "Millions will die and the rest will be crushed under the heavy hand of THRUSH."

"I don't know how much time has passed," Solo said. "It seems like a century, but I doubt that it has been more than twenty minutes since that smoke exploded in Pierce's face."

"We probably have not more than two hours at the most," April said. "We've got to get out of here."

"We'd never, make it," Illya Kuryakin insisted. "Being on this side of the hill, we were protected from the greater part of the blast and heat. There is nothing to stop radioactive debris from falling however. Once outside we will face increasing deadly radiation as more and more particles fall out of the mushroom cloud."

"I think civil defense authorities in the States figure that the worst of the fallout happens within the first hour after detonation," Mark Slate said.

"But lighter particles keep falling for some time," Solo said. "It is not really safe to go out of here for two weeks."

"How long do you think we could live if we rushed it now?" April asked. "Our job is not to stay alive, but to wipe out this terrible THRUSH threat to the world."

"I know," Solo said. "And we're going to have to make a move within the next hour regardless of the danger. If it kills us before we make it, then we did the best we could."

"What about Mr. Waverly?"

April asked. "I know he said to keep a radio silence, but could we call him and see if he can't convince the U.S. authorities to hit this place with an Intercontinental ballistic missile?"

"I doubt if he could convince anyone in authority to take the risk," Solo said. "Even if he could, we would have to give a more precise location of the control and tracking station. All we know is that it is fifteen miles or so down river. Then there would have to be time to reprogram the missile's guidance system for the new target. That takes time. Most missiles, I understand, are set in advance for predetermined targets."

"Then it is up to us," Slate said. "So let's do something, even if it is wrong," Illya cried. "I have an idea where that tracking station is."

"Where?" April asked.

"Do you remember back there in Taipei when we first learned our

destination?"

"You mean a million years ago?"

April said. "It seems that long anyway."

"You and I looked over the Chinese intelligence maps of this area," Illya went on.

"Yes," April agreed. "We were looking for escape routes."

"About fifteen miles downstream the river narrows to a rapid through a very deep gorge. You suggested that being a good place to go if we were pursued. It would be next to impossible for anyone to scale those cliffs against determined opposition."

"You may be right," April said. "But you frighten me. If the tracking station is located in that wild area, our chances of knocking it out are one degree below the impossible mark."

A deep silence followed her words. It was totally dark in the shelter. April could not see her companions' faces, but she realized the consternation that must be mirrored there.

FOURTEEN

DOWN RIVER

After a long silence, Solo said, “I don’t think fallout is our problem. Most of the vaporized radioactive material is still rising in the cloud. It is being sucked up by the hellish fire storm and winds. Our greatest barrier is the firestorm and it should pass quickly right in here for it has only the river debris to feed on.”

He got up. They could hear him shuffling in the dark.

“Give me a hand,” he said. “The dirt won’t be so thick at the top of the pile. I want to see if the firestorm has passed us by.”

They went to work with him, digging at the soft pile of dirt near the ceiling. It took only about fifteen minutes for them to clear an opening.

As Solo had predicted, the combustible material on the water had burned itself out. The wild flames were no longer sweeping up the hill.

“A Geiger counter is the one thing the lab never put in with our protective devices,” April Dancer said. “It is the one thing we need now.”

Solo looked down at the luminous face of his watch. The minutes were ticking away rapidly. Where before time dragged, now it was moving more like a drag race.

Except along the river banks, where material was exhausted, the firestorm was still raging through the doomed city. From ground zero the huge column of the radioactive cloud was continuing to rise. The wind was being sucked into the column with gale fury.

April thought as she looked down on the carnage that it was a scene from the end of the world.

Napoleon Solo broke in on her thoughts. “When that cloud drops its fallout, we’ll be completely trapped. It’s move now or never.”

“Who’s arguing?” Illya asked. “Get going!”

“Our greatest danger is between here and the river,” Solo said. “Once we get past the ground initial fallout the river should be fairly clean. The swift current should have swept its radiation downstream by now.”

“I don’t know how much radiation we’ll have to plow through between here and the water,” Slate observed, “but we can take up to about three hundred Roentgens without fatal results.”

“Without a Geiger counter to tell us how much radiation we are being exposed to, we can only take a chance,” Solo said. “It’s a blind gamble.”

“Wait!” April cried as Solo started to climb out the hole for the dash to the river. “Wait! There may be a way. I thought of it when you mention about the river sweeping its radiation downstream. I think we can sweep a clear path for ourselves to the river!”

“That is going to take a mighty big broom, April,” Illya said.

“I think the word is big boom!”

April replied. “We’ll start another slide. The radioactive material will not have had time to penetrate very far. The fallout will be mostly on top of the ground. A slide will sweep us a clear path directly to the river.”

“I see nothing to prevent it from working–unless we bury ourselves,” Solo said.

“We’ll get some radiation,” Illya said thoughtfully. “I doubt that it will exceed the maximum dose.”

“We’ll have to move fast before the really heavy fallout comes from the mushroom cloud,” Slate said.

“Then let’s go,” Solo said. “You can’t live forever—and the way things have been going lately, I’m not sure I’d want to! Brace yourselves. I’m going to throw the bomb. This shelter is unstable now. There is no telling how it will stand the shock of another explosion.”

Solo did not try to throw the bomb close to the shelter. He figured that if the slide started below, it would pull down the loose dirt above it. This would minimize the chance of the remaining concrete shelter walls collapsing on them.

He leaned far out the hole in the dirt barrier and threw the bomb, ducking back in as soon as it left his fingers. There was a breathless moment’s wait and then the ground shook with the explosive shock. A huge crack broke across the ceiling.

The blocked dirt poured down hill. The floor heaved and split. Dirt flushed through the ceiling break. The ceiling sagged, held off them only by its strained steel reinforcement. A block gave way and almost crushed them before they could jump back to safety.

The floor buckled wildly. It shivered and started to slide. The entire structure had jarred loose from its anchoring foundation.

The dirt fell away from the open end. A corner of the structure dug deep into the soft dirt. It spun around, throwing the four from U.N.C.L.E. hard against the wall.

They were sliding faster now. A huge slice of the hill was going with them. The concrete room teetered dangerously.

“Get ready to jump!” Solo called.

“If it turns over, we’ll be crushed!”

When the room spun around again, he caught the edge of the broken wall and threw himself out. He tried to jump up as soon as he hit, but Illya Kuryakin, just behind, somersaulted into him.

"Mark?" Solo cried.

"Here behind you," Mark Slate said pulling himself out of the hole he plowed in the earth.

"Where's April?"

"There!" the Englishman said, pointing down the hill. "You didn't expect to get ahead of that stick of dynamite, did you?"

The concrete bunker–what remained of it–was plowing its way down the soft slide left by the previous avalanches. April Dancer was running along in the groove it left, heading for the river.

The three men started after her. The ground was more solid under the furrow left by the present slide.

The bunker plunged all the way to the river and into the water. The U.N.C.L.E. quartet followed, swimming out to the center of the river where the strong current caught them.

At this point the river made a half circle to slip around the hill whose blocking bulk saved their lives when the H-Bomb went off. While they were swept around the curve the sight ahead sickened them.

They were the first people they had seen affected by the wanton bombing. Corpses littered the banks of the river, where people aflame had run for relief. Milling, screaming groups staggered aimlessly, pushed and mauled by the gale-force winds still being sucked into the towering mushroom cloud.

The wind was also kicking up high waves on the river. Water splashed continually over the heads of the U.N.C.L.E. quartet as the current swept them rapidly downstream.

April was still in the lead. The others saw her turn and wave her hand back frantically at them. The river was curving slightly and they couldn't see what had disturbed her.

Then as they made the turn, they saw that a wooden span bridge had collapsed across the river. Thermal heat from the initial fire ball had set it afire.

It was partially burned away and had collapsed all along the span. However large sections were jammed along the banks where the river current had rammed them into the mud. Portions extending above the water were still flaming. The wild wind was whipping flame, ash, cinders, and sparks into a cloud that fogged completely across the river.

April slackened speed to let them catch up with her.

"That ash must be radioactive!" she gasped. "It is flying everywhere! The river is covered with it!"

“You can bet your sweet–and probably short–life on it being poisonous with radiation,” Slate said.

“Damn the radiation! Full speed ahead!” Illya yelled. “It is suicide to get out of the water. We’ve got to go on and take our chances on living long enough to knock out that control and tracking station. I knew it before, but I never realized what stopping those H-bombs really meant until I saw these poor devils in this man-made hell!”

“I don’t know how far that ash extends down river,” Solo said. “All we can do is duck under the water and swim as long as our breaths hold out. We’ll come up when we must. Maybe we can get past the worst of it.”

April looked across the water at the pitiful mass of dying humanity. “Let’s hope so, for a lot of people’s sake,” she said softly.

They let the river current carry them down almost to the zone where the radioactive ash was being whipped on the water. April took a deep breath and ducked under the water. She did not try to swim hard and fast. She knew that useless struggles would only exhaust her held breath that much faster. The swift current was carrying her along at a good clip.

Her lungs started to burn. She had no way of knowing how far she had come under the water. She didn’t dare rise up until she reached the point of drowning.

Her oxygen-starved heart was hammering frantically. She was growing dizzy. Her chest felt as though it was going to explode any second.

But still she went on, forcing her tortured body to hold out just a bit longer. Finally she knew she could stand it no longer. Blood was pounding so badly in her head that she could scarcely think.

She threw up her hands as she kicked up with her feet, threshing out wildly to knock back any radioactive debris that might be floating above her.

Hastily she gulped in air. It was hot and smelled of smoke and charred flesh.

She looked around. She saw Solo not far from her, but the others were out of sight.

“We’re safe!” Solo shouted. “Keep moving!”

“Where’s Illya and Mark!” she yelled back.

“Take care of yourself!” Napoleon Solo shouted back. “We’ve got a job to do and that job isn’t to worry about each other!”

It sounded heartless, but she knew that it wasn’t. It was a simple exposition of the U.N.C.L.E. creed. Nothing personal mattered. The job had to be done!

Solo moved over close to her. “We’ve got to make better time,” he yelled above the roar of the fires on the shore. “Time is slipping away

from us. We've got at least thirteen miles to go yet."

April took another deep breath. It made her lungs, still tortured from the long underwater ordeal, burn with a painful fire.

"What about the heavy fallout?" she asked.

"It's coming and it's coming soon. The gamma radiation is what we have to fear. There is no way to shield ourselves from it except to get into a shelter. And there are no more shelters."

She swam alongside of Solo for about a quarter mile, constantly looking back in hope that she would see the other two men from U.N.C.L.E. Then, as they rounded another bend in the snaking river, she saw a sampan directly ahead. It was bobbing on the choppy water–a flat-bottomed boat with a plaited reed cover.

As she swerved to avoid it, a head stuck out from under the canopy.

"What kept you?" Mark Slate said with a grin. "Illya, here's a hitchhiker. Give her a hand."

Kuryakin leaned over the gunwale and helped April into the little boat. Slate did the same for Solo.

"Where did you get this thing?" April gasped.

"What do you mean 'this thing'?" Slate said with high good spirit. "If you don't like our transportation, get out and swim!"

"There was a concrete dock just below the bridge. This thing, as you call it, was moored under it," Illya Kuryakin explained. "The heavy concrete blocked the thermal blast and it was one of the few things that didn't burst into flames from the heat of the fireball."

"The concrete must have blocked much of the radiation as well," Solo said.

"We thought so," Illya said, "but we didn't take any chances. We splashed water all over to wash off any fallout particles that might be radioactive."

"A good job," Solo said. "The canopy will stop a lot of fallout if we start getting any."

"And we can keep washing it off with river water," Slate said "It looks like we are getting a break at last."

"Just a lull before the worst storm of an," Napoleon Solo said. 'We still have to storm a mountain stronghold and stop the firing signal to those cluster bombs in space."

He looked back at the destruction behind them. He shuddered as his mind transported that scene to the middle of every major world capital on earth.

"We've got to make it!" Solo said through clinched teeth.

FIFTEEN

FIVE SECONDS TO ETERNITY

After cutting through the urban area, the river swept on through a range of stepped hills. Squeezed by high gorges upriver, the current was swift. The land they passed was a checkerboard of lush greenness and seared destruction. The hilly nature of the land protected large sections of rice land. They could see streams of burned refugees streaming into these green oases from the destroyed areas pitiful groups headed for lingering radiation deaths.

An anxious hour passed. The hills rose higher on each side of the river. There was less and less sign of atomic destruction, for the ground burst was confined to a smaller area by the surrounding hills than would have been the case of an airburst bomb. Then the ruin would have extended over many times the area.

Rocky cliffs loomed high on each side of the bobbing sampan. The river became swifter, then so rough that the tossing little boat almost capsized.

Shortly after this they were almost smashed against a concrete pier that extended a short way into the river. With difficulty they beached the sampan and followed the pier to a set of narrow stairs cut out of the living rock.

The only light came from the stars showing through the rent of rocks at the top of the gorge. Spray from the churning river fell like heavy rain. Water splashed high on the rocks and ran off the steps in heavy rivulets. The steps were narrow and Slippery. Occasionally in the dark they brushed against branches of hardy juniper that miraculously had sprouted and grown in cracks along the sheer rock surface.

"How long have we got?" April asked.

"Time has run out on us," Solo said. "If they fire the clusters on schedule, as they informed Tiell, we have less than fifteen minutes."

"Fifteen minutes," April repeated.

Fifteen minutes to save the lives of two hundred million people around the world! *And we still don't even know where we are going or what we will find there*, April thought.

But she kept her thoughts to herself as they struggled up the steep steps.

They went a short distance farther; then the steps switched to the right parallel along the cliff face. They were several feet along the

narrow trail when a searchlight suddenly cut out of the darkness below.

The chilling chatter of machine gun fire broke above the roar of the rushing river below.

The four from U.N.C.L.E. scattered as best they could. Solo, who was ahead fell flat, pressing against the bottom step where the steep angle protected him from direct fire. Illya, directly behind him, dodged behind a bulge of rock. Mark Slate in the rear retreated back down the step.

Only April Dancer in between had no place to go. Another machine gun cut loose. She was caught between the two lines of fire. She couldn't go forward and to retreat after Mark Slate would run her directly into the second gun's bullets.

She pressed against the face of the cliff, momentarily in darkness as the searchlight beam probed for Mark Slate below her. Then it swept back, throwing her crouching body in bold relief against the wet rocks.

She knew that a deadly hail of bullets would follow her discovery. She didn't hesitate. There was a juniper growing in the rock just over the lip of the trail.

April ducked as the first burst of gunfire slammed into the cliff above her head. She threw herself flat on the trail. Another burst of gunfire ripped above her head. She realized that the next would tear through her body.

She had only one slim chance. She grabbed the edge of the trail ledge and swung herself down into the branches of the tree growing from a crack in the rock.

The branch sagged under her weight. She was out of range of the machine gun now, but the tree limb dragged so badly she thought for a horrified moment that it was going to break under her weight.

She pulled herself up against the trunk. It was spray-wet and scratched cruelly through the coarse coolie clothing she wore. The entire mass of the tree sagged. She stopped moving for fear the roots would pull away from their purchase in the rocks.

The searchlight swept across the trail, seeking a target. April Dancer saw a burst of muzzle blast from Slate's gun as he fired to draw attention away from the rest, for he had better cover.

April looked down as the searchlight swept around. The river was a hundred feet below. Jagged rocks thrown down by construction of the trail lay directly under her.

She looked up. The top of the cliff was not too far overhead. Now she could see the occasional silhouette of a man's head beside the moving eye of the light. The machine gun fire was coming from a position to the right of the light.

Solo and Illya were pinned down. She was clinging for her life in the branches of the tree. That left only Mark Slate to fight back. And he was in no position to get a good target.

They were effectively stopped. It would be impossible for them to get past this guard that held all the advantages.

Then she heard a voice cry from the top of the cliff: "It's U.N.C.L.E.! I can recognize the sound of that Special!"

"Get over and bring some gas shells!" another voice cried. "That'll rout the rats out of their holes! Hurry!"

The others heard the command also. They knew this meant the end for them if the gas shells were fired. Solo rose up from his protection, firing his Special as fast as he could pull the trigger. It was a desperate move in an attempt to break the searchlight and give them a chance to make an upward rush in the dark.

Not a shot hit the target. He dropped back to slip another clip in the gun.

"Don't!" April cried. "Don't risk it again, Napoleon. Let me try something first!"

"We can't wait, April!" Solo shouted back. "We have less than three minutes left before the countdown is completed and the signal sent to fire the cluster bombs!"

"Give me thirty seconds!" April cried. "Don't get yourself killed for nothing! We still have a lot to do before we crush this monstrous thing!"

Napoleon Solo hesitated. He had no idea what April had in mind or what she could do, clinging as she was for her life in the branches of the juniper on the cliff face. However, he knew the girl and her extraordinary resourcefulness–proven in a hundred equally desperate fights with THRUSH.

"Go ahead!" he shouted. "I'll hold up for thirty seconds!"

April balanced as best she could, gripping the tree trunk with her knees and looping one arm over a swaying limb. She fumbled in her purse, which was draped over her shoulder under her loose coolie jacket. She grabbed at the remaining pill-bombs.

In her hurry she dropped one. The roar as it exploded on the rocks below was deafening. The cliff shook. There was a rattle of rocks falling from around the strained roots of the tree.

April hung on grimly. Above the dying echoes of the accidental explosion she heard Solo cry: "Don't, April! You can't throw the bomb high enough to clear the top of the cliff!"

Then she heard him shout back Kuryakin and Slate: "Get ready! We'll make a concentrated attack. It's all we can do–advance and pray one of us will make it "

"Give me one more chance!" April screamed.

She grabbed the tree branch directly above her, pushing a bomb in between two twigs. She bent the limb back as far as she dared and then let it spring back. The bomb was hurled upward.

The searchlight swung over, trying to spot the source of her cries. In that moment of darkness, Solo leaped to his feet to rush up the steps.

The light swung back after its fruitless attempt to find April. It caught Napoleon Solo full before he could get to cover farther up the trail.

Both Illya and Slate jumped out and starting shooting frantically to divide the enemy's attention and hopefully draw fire from Solo to themselves.

There was a moment's hesitation on the part of the THRUSH machine gunner in the face of this concentrated attack by U.N.C.L.E.

That second was fatal for the men on the cliff. The bomb, hurled upward by April's makeshift catapult, cleared the top of the cliff. It struck–and exploded!

The shock waves ran down the cliff. Rocks were loosened. A section of the cliff where the explosion went off broke loose with a thunderous roar. Tons of rock plunged down past April.

The tree shivered and sagged lower. April swung around frantically, trying to grab the edge of the trail ledge. She missed it by inches!

The searchlight was out, carried down by the collapsing cliff. It was almost totally dark. Only the starlight shining down through the gorge gave any illumination at all. April could not tell how well the tree was still rooted.

Then she heard Mark Slate yell: "April! Where are you?"

"Here!" she cried.

"Keep talking! I need your voice to guide me!"

"Mark? Need any help with April?" It was Illya Kuryakin's voice calling from farther up the steps.

"Follow Napoleon and keep him covered!" Mark Slate shouted back. "I'll take care of April!"

Guided by her voice he leaned over the ledge. She pawed in the dark until she caught his hand. He braced himself and called for her to let go. Slowly he pulled her to safety.

"Okay?" he asked anxiously.

"I'll stop and figure that out tomorrow!" she snapped. "Come on!"

Together they followed the other two men from U.N.C.L.E. The collapsing cliff, they found, had destroyed part of the stairs. They caught up with Solo and Illya as the two men from U.N.C.L.E. were scaling the broken face.

As they made the top, they saw a small cluster of concrete

buildings about a hundred yards away. A man came running out. Illya Kuryakin cut him down with a burst of fire from the U.N.C.L.E. Special.

"Take the center building," Napoleon Solo yelled. "It's got antenna on the roof. It must be the tracking station."

They headed for it. A guard cut loose with a machine gun, but he was confused by the fan of fire thrown at him by the spreading U.N.C.L.E. quartet. He hesitated too long and died from a bullet in the head.

Solo charged into the station, closely followed by the other three. The room was empty except for one man. He was standing by a control panel, frantically punching buttons with his right hand while his left pointed a gun at Solo.

He fired, but in his agitation his shot went wild. He tried to dodge, but Solo's shot caught him in the side. He fell, dropping the gun. He twisted, trying to grab it, but April Dancer jammed her foot down on his hand.

The THRUSH man looked up at them. He coughed blood and then snarled: "You've lost, U.N.C.L.E.'s! You've lost! I got off the command signal before you broke in! I've activated the control mechanism in the cluster bomb. In five minutes, when the bomb reaches the proper orientation in orbit, the dispersal unit will start throwing the bombs into their trajectory! Nothing can stop it except a direct hit by a missile and there isn't time for that! You've lost, damn you!"

"Illya! You're our computer expert!" Solo snapped, "Can you tell anything about that console?"

Illya Kuryakin sprang to the bank of gauges and control buttons. Above it there were slots for inserting keyed punch cards. He hastily punched a button marked *Correction Control*.

Nothing happened.

"I think he's right!" Kuryakin said hastily. "I can't stop the signal!"

"Isn't there *anything* we can do?" Mark Slate asked.

"I don't think so–" Illya said, scanning the instrument bank.

Before all their eyes rose the terrible vision of death and destruction falling on Washington, London, Moscow, Paris and–

"Wait!" Illya cried. "Here's a key marked *attitude rocket adjustment*. The original announcement on Satellite-I said it was built on the U.S. MOL satellite system. I know that had small vernier rockets aboard to allow slight orbital corrections from the earth. If this has the same and this key indicates it–"

He paused, his jaw set hard, his eyes bleak. "How much time have we?" he asked hurriedly.

"Two minutes!" Solo replied. "April!" Illya cried. "Get Waverly on the pen-communicator!"

While Kuryakin studied the control panel, April extended the antenna of the pen to convert it into the famed U.N.C.L.E. world-wide communications set.

"Waverly here," came the familiar voice after a hasty exchange of identification codes.

"Mr. Waverly This is an extreme emergency!" April cried into the communicator. "We must have the code for firing vernier rockets for attitude control on a MOL-type space vehicle!"

Waverly recognized the urgency in her voice. He didn't hesitate. She could hear the click of opening communications lines and the U.N.C.L.E. chief's crisp command: "Space Track Headquarters! Emergency! I want code for MOL attitude verniers!"

And then back to China he said to April: "How much time have we?"

"One-and-a-half minutes!" she replied. "THRUSH has transmitted the command to release the clusters. There is a three-minute delay between reception of the command and the activation of the bombs. Illya says our only hope is to start the vernier rockets!"

"I understand," Waverly said.

"The verniers are to stabilize the spacecraft in orbit. They could also be used to destabilize as well. And that would unsettle the bombs' aim."

At the control panel Kuryakin looked up at the clock ticking off the seconds of the countdown. There was one minute left!

"We have only sixty seconds left, Mr. Waverly!" April said into the pen communicator.

"Mr. Waverly! Lab control! We must have information on the panel arrangements–"

"Take it, Miss Dancer!" Waverly said.

April shoved the pen-communicator in front of Illya's face. Quickly the Russian read off the figures on the gauges and instruments.

"Set the gradient gauge at fifteen degrees–"

Illya Kuryakin adjusted the dial and anxiously looked up at the clock.

It had ticked down to forty-five seconds.

"Adjust your gain control for seventy-five per cent!" the U.N.C.L.E. lab ordered.

Illya made the adjustments. The time was down to thirty.

"Try a cross feed on the two dials. That will give an indication that the setup is working."

"There is no change in gain," Illya reported.

Sweat was dripping from his face. The countdown clock was down to ten seconds. "Time's running out!" he said.

"Feed these orbital calculations into the computer section of the

console–”

Illya’s fingers shook slightly as he punched in the U.N.C.L.E. laboratory calculations.

The countdown clock was down to five seconds and moving swiftly toward zero.

“Press the fire button and then–”

“It’s pressed!” Illya called back half across the world to the U.N.C.L.E. laboratory. “Now what–?”

“Now pray–for all of us!”

The firing signal leaped across space with the speed of light. The countdown clock showed two seconds before the cluster bombs reached the precise point in space where they must be released in order to hit their predetermined target.

“We are watching the–”

“Wait!” Illya interrupted. “A red light is flaring on the panel.”

“That means the verniers are firing! It–”

“A green light just came on! The countdown clock is at 0!”

“The bombs have been released!”

“Will they hit their targets?”

“I don’t know! It depends on whether the verniers fired in sufficient time to roll the cluster bomb case around so that the bombs were aimed at space instead of the earth!”

“Must we wait until the bombs drop to know?” Solo cut in.

“Don’t get nervous, Napoleon!” the lab scientist, who knew Solo well, said. “You have a back seat. We here are one of the targets! Let me get nervous first! Actually, our scanner-trackers are trying to get the answer for us now.”

“Here’s an emergency message being broadcast world-wide by the United Nations,” Waverly broke in. “It says, ‘Space tracking stations in both Russia and the U.S. report the Red Satellite I spawned fifteen objects believed to be atomic bombs. All people on earth are cautioned to take immediate Civil Defense precautions pending further notice–”

“This is Space Track Lab, Mr. Waverly,” the speaker on the U.N.C.L.E. chief’s desk broke in. “We have an accurate report on the cluster bombs trajectory.”

“Yes! Yes?” Waverly said hoarsely.

“The verniers fired by Mr. Kuryakin were successful in rolling the bomb case. The bombs are directed toward deep space instead of the earth.”

“Thank you,” Waverly said.

“And thank you, Mr. Solo, Mr. Kuryakin, Mr. Slate and Miss Dancer. Thanks from me and from two hundred million people who

are alive now because of you,”